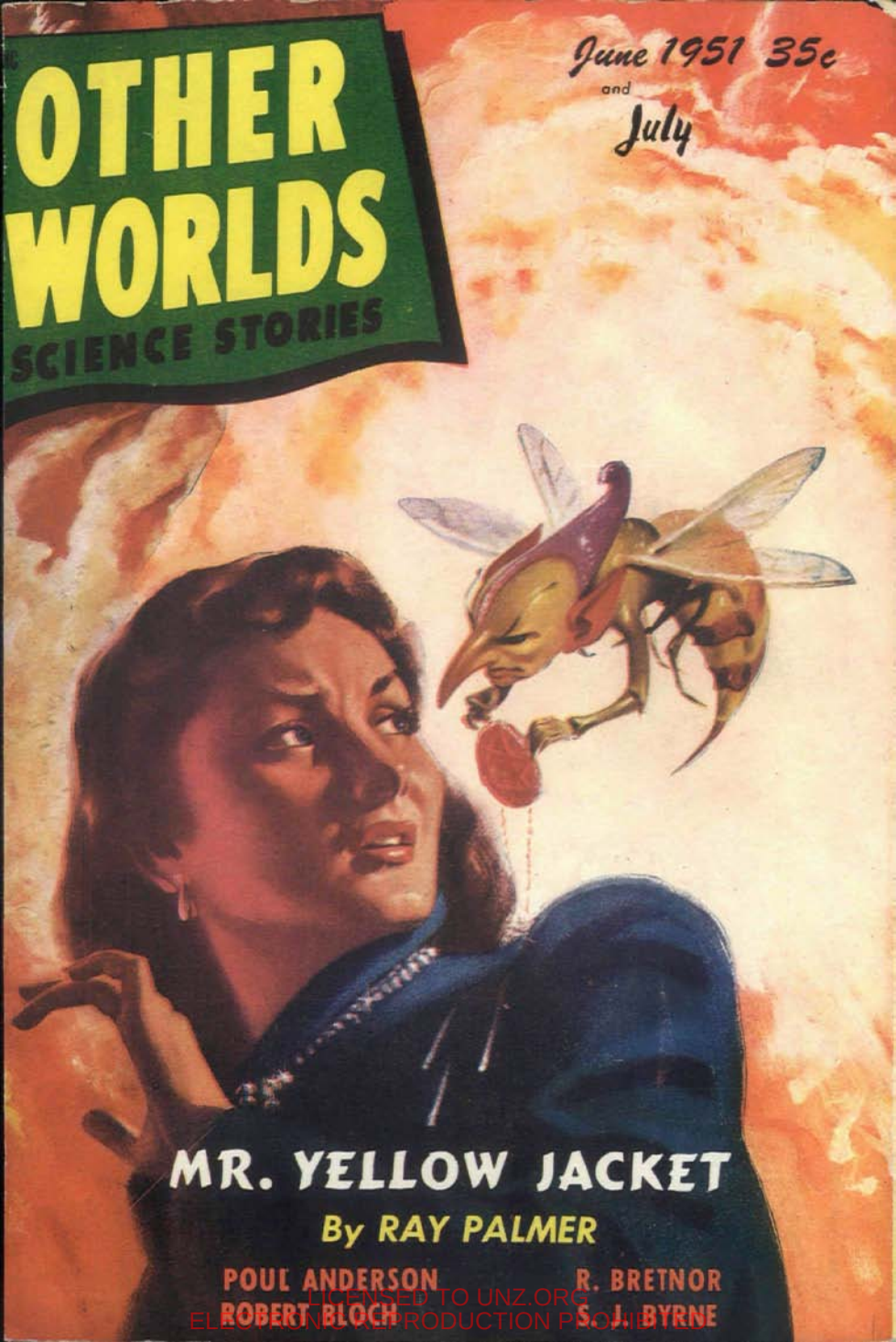
OTHER WORLDS
SCIENCE STORIES

June 1951 35c
and
July



MR. YELLOW JACKET
By RAY PALMER

POUL ANDERSON
ROBERT BLOCH
R. BRETNOR
S. J. BYRNE

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J. ALLEN ST. JOHN

AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS FANTASY ILLUSTRATOR

By Darrell C. Richardson

FOR a number of years I have had a great admiration for the art work of J. Allen St. John. I was introduced to his work through his magnificent illustrations in the "Tarzan" and "Martian" books of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Later I began to collect books and magazines that contained his illustrations. More recently, I have been collecting original paintings and illustrations of his work.

Last summer I had the privilege of meeting Mr. St. John and having a long visit with him in his own studio in Chicago. My younger brother is a student at the American Academy of Art where St. John is a professor. I decided to drive up to Chicago for a week of book and magazine searching combined with a visit with my brother. Plans had already been made for me to meet St. John.

My first visit to the Field Museum,

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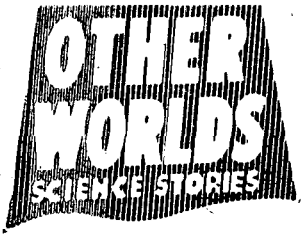

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EDITORIAL

THIS is the month of unburdening. After a number of years we are presenting here a list of the pen names that have been used by Richard S. Shaver, the stories he has written under these pen names, and the reactions they have received from readers.

Mr. Shaver is Alexander Blade. But not always, as that is a house name of *Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures.* Under that name he wrote "Flesh Against Spirit" which was received with mixed emotions. It was either liked or disliked, with no in-between.

Mr. Shaver is D. Richard Sharpe. Under that name he wrote "First Rocket" which was very well received indeed for a short story.

G. H. Irwin is another name used frequently by Mr. Shaver, although not exclusively, having been used by your editor as a house name in both Ziff-Davis and Clark Publishing Company. It is still used by both companies as a house name, a peculiar situation, but there seems to be no difficulty. Under this name the extremely well-liked Frank Farar stories were published. They include the very well-liked "Lair Of The Grimalkin" in *Amazing* and "Where No Foot Walks" and "Glass Woman Of Venus" in OW, both very well received indeed.

Stan Raycraft is the fourth Shaver pen name, and one of the best liked stories in *Amazing* in recent years was his "Pillars Of Delight", which was one of the best Satan stories we've ever seen.

For number five, we have *Peter Dexter* as the author of "Palace Of Darkness" and "The Gamin"; the first rated as good and the last rated as better than the first.

Paul Lohrman is yet another Shaver pen name, and "Dinosaur World" was the excellent short novel published under that name.

Taken from the town near which he now lives, *Wes Amherst* was the byline on "Sons Of The Serpent" which helped so much to make OW successful.

Eighth on the list is a one-timer which was used by mistake, and with apologies to *Edwin Benson.* One of those things where your editor is paying more attention to his secretaries' legs than to his editing. "Marai's Wife" was the story, and it was accepted as well worth reading.

Here your editor's research breaks down, and so does Mr. Shaver's memory. No doubt one of our readers can help us out, for we don't have at hand the pen name under which "When The Moon Bounced" was published. If it is not one of the eight given previously it makes nine science-fiction pen names for Richard S. Shaver, creator of The Shaver Mystery. All in all, it has proved that he can please the readers *without* his mystery. And now that the fans have demanded that he discontinue hiding his light under a bushel, we will be proud to present his finest future efforts.

Next item to mention this month is our contest story, "Test Piece". Due to a change in our printing schedule, we are going to press with this issue before contest closing

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time, so results will have to be announced in our *next* issue, which will be dated September. We are not skipping any issues, only bringing our dating into a more consistent line with news-stand appearance.

And speaking of our contest, the answers have been pouring in—from Canada, England, and Australia as well as from the U. S. By the next issue we'll have judged the entries and give you the list of the winners of prizes 1 through 51—especially prize No. 51.

Your editor has a story in this issue, the third in three issues, which has received the following commendation from our Managing Editor: "It stinks! Just like the other two." Shucks, though, the rest of the issue's *really* got it, don't you think? Take that yarn by Byrne. Terrific! And for really clever stories, how about "The Fledermaus Report", and "The Missionaries"? Then take Bob Bloch's "The Tin You Love To Touch" for humor. How *about* that. And for tear-jerking, we give you "The Rocket Man". A pretty good line-up, we think. And if you think so too, send in your subscriptions. You get twelve issues for $3.00, saving yourself $1.20. What's more, you get your magazine clean and flat and unmarred in a handsome envelope a week ahead of the news-stands. If a mere forty million of you readers do that, we get $120,000,000.00 which means you'll get a bigger and better magazine, and then we're all satisfied.

Wisconsin is beautiful at this time of the year. The only trouble is that when your editor should be working on the magazine he finds himself strolling down to the lake to watch the blue herons or walking over to the mill race to see if the trout are running yet. They are, too, but the season isn't open. However, we have a plan that we're going to put into effect as soon as the season does open. Yeah, you guessed it . . . the law says you gotta let 'em spawn, but it doesn't say you gotta let 'em get away from you afterwards!

Report on the Palmer paralysis . . . We now drive our car again. State capitol reports significant reduction in auto licenses for 1951. Whassamatter, boys, scared? I drive okay!

Report from Howard Browne . . . *Amazing* is gaining in circulation. Congratulations, Howard, and we're recommending that OTHER WORLDS readers get the magazine. You don't want to miss stories like Rog Phillips' "Who Sows the Wind . . . ", so take that $1.20 you saved by subscribing to OW and buy four and four-fifths copies of *Amazing Stories* .

Editors, it seems, are people looked upon by readers with awe. Sometimes this is not undeservedly, but many times it is a little bit overdone—by the editor. He isn't anything unusual, only a man performing a job. Sometimes he's a woman, but sex doesn't seem to make any great difference in editorial ability. The real point to editing is the ability to pick the kind of stories the readers want to read.

Now, assuming that editors do pick the type of stories readers want, is it because they know *how* to write them also? Is editorial judgment dependent upon actual personal ability? In short, can editors also *write?*

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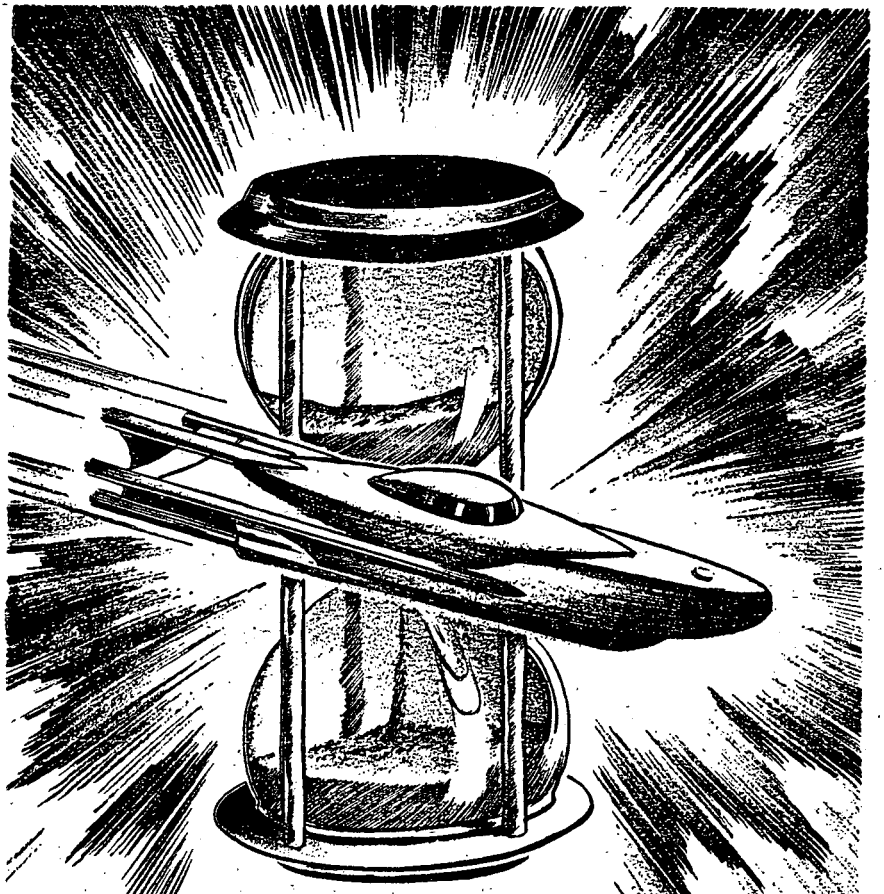

TIME FLAW

By Russell Branch

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"Throughout the ages it has been the common fate of the traveler, having once lost his bearings, to end up where he had begun. The unfortunate wanderer in deep space may find himself treading the same disheartening circle, not only in Space but Time . . ."

from *Speculations and Interpolations*

Dean Halverell, Lode Pub. Co. 2150

THE LEGEND

IT was a mere pin-point in space when they first saw it—a flyspeck on the shining face of Infinity.

The younger ones pointed and speculated and wondered. The elders, whose eyes had grown as dim as their hopes, could only shake their heads and return grumbling to the cool of the caves. All but one, a white-haired woman—she still watched and faith helped her sight.

The natives, who had no eyes at all, merely nodded in their own peculiar way and registered impartial patience.

Yet on the morning they all looked again. The flyspeck was still there, infinitesimally larger, immeasurably nearer. They claimed they could mark its progress, those who had seen it at first. They said: Look at the difference in angle! See how much closer to the edge of our Mother!

The natives, who had no mouths to speak, said: It is only to be expected. The white-haired woman said: He has come at last!

But the others could only stare unseeing. They saw only the great golden globe of the Mother Planet, looming stupendous and sheltering against the rim of their own tiny world. They tried to dissuade their young from heartbreaking expectation. Far easier to endure in resignation, they said, than to suffer again the pangs of disappointment. For there have been other calls before your time, other false alarms.

Still the young looked, and one white-haired woman; still the natives waited with dauntless patience.

The third day there was a fleck on the rim of the great planet; by night a star where there had been none before. They began building their signal fire at daybreak, the young and hopeful, while the natives signified approval.

All day they labored, dragging thorny limbs of the giant spider-cactus up the rocky trail. By nightfall the pile was huge on High Point; and the distant star was a comet. The elders came again to plead—but stayed to help. They too called it a "ship" now, and excitedly added their efforts. The natives only nodded again, in a headless way, and withdrew in silent expectancy.

In the morning it was there, bur-

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nished and gleaming. A slender silver streak in the cloudless sky. The promise of a tomorrow they never thought would come; the answer to an old woman's prayer.

A boy was sent running back to the desterted caves. He brought a brand, and they touched off the towering heap of cactus limbs. Its message rolled up in great billowing clouds, and then they retreated higher still, to the very edge of the ultimate crevasse.

Here the younger leaped and danced and shouted, far beyond any thought of exhaustion. "They" would see the signal, they surely would—and the ship was getting closer. But some only watched now and grew more thoughtful, and began to mutter among themselves.

"What's the matter, old Sour One? You can't say that isn't a ship!"

"Yes . . . it's a ship, all right."

"Of course it's a ship! And an Earth ship at that!"

"Yes, but —"

"Just like the one we've always pictured! Just like the one you yourself drew for me when I was a lad."

"Yes . . . *just like the one which brought us here.*"

There was the trouble. That was what dried their words in the First Settlers' mouths. For it had been . . . how long?

The trip itself, until their trouble, had ticked off long years on the clocks back home. How long here, on this barren isle? Who could say, where time itself was stranded? Where a man lived to be called "Sour One" by the *tenth* generation?

Anyway, time *had* passed. A wisp of time as the natives marked it—but centuries of time as it was measured on Earth. To the old ones who pondered this, who remembered the way of Earth—the ship was impossible. Not a hope, only a ghost from the bitter past.

Thus memory stirred in their unwilling brains, and they looked at each other sadly, shook their heads.

Still the young ones refused to heed. They had heard the Legend before, over and over again. What matter the superstitious tales of a few senile ancients who forever confused past with future? This was today, that was a ship. *Their* ship, their hope of rescue. The fact was as real as the gleam of her hull.

But there was still the anxiety that she would pass them by. Her course now seemed tangent, not direct as it had appeared at first. More wood was fetched in frantic haste, heaped upon the beacon. Then they all climbed back to the cliff's top ridge, to hope and pray and watch, while below the natives waited in perfect silence.

The natives *knew*, the elders *knew*, but the young still held out to the very last. As they always did, until the answer was plain beyond dispute that there would be no turning. For the ship still held her curve across the face of the Mother Planet: a course as fixed and constant and irrevocable as the blazing orbit of their own giant sun.

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Then the Leader told them: told those who would listen. He repeated the Legend as he knew it himself, as it had been repeated through the ages in a speechless tongue. This he told them: what the ship was, and whence it had come, and why it must pass them unswerving by.

Still there were a few whose ears were deaf, whose eyes still uplifted in unquenchable hope. They interrupted now with shouts of triumph. "They've seen us, they've spotted our signal! They're launching a lifeboat to pick us up!"

And that seemed true, as far as it went. For there was another pinpoint now, diverging from the gleaming path of the ship itself, rapidly getting bigger.

But the ship herself still sailed on! That posed a fearsome question, even to those who had shouted down the Leader. Had the lifeboat only been abandoned then? Did it only bring those who like themselves were in trouble?

Even this the Leader could answer—and now they all listened. They heard the Legend out to its bitter end—or was it only the beginning?

For the Leader said thus: The space ship and her craft were but a mirage, a shimmering reflection of what had happened long ago. A flaw, as he put it, in the fabric of space and time; the Legend itself was proof indisputable.

Then he paused and waited for the protest he knew would come. It came from the weeping, white-haired woman like a cry of despair . . .

"That's not true! It can't be true, for the ship is real!"

His answer was gentle, as to a child. "My dear, if the ship is real, then *we* are the illusion."

I

HIS name was Brad Hunter and at twenty-seven he could call himself "Captain." Captain Brad Hunter, master and owner of the *S.S. Stella* . . .

It was going to look fine in his obituary, in the report that would list the *Stella* missing with all aboard. Or rather "elapsed," which was the official designation since time had grown fluid.

His desk mocked him with its clutter of useless charts and meaningless plot-curves. He raised his eyes and a bright promotion poster leered back at him from the bulkhead above. *Vagabond Cruise to Adventure and Riches,* it screamed in gaudy letters. *Seek Your Fortune Among the Stars!*

Well, they were going to get their money's worth. His eyes drifted hopelessly out toward the open bridge. Spike Casey — First Mate, Second Mate, helmsman and bottleman — was giving the controls his usual go-to-hell attention. Brad's own feeling of inadequacy rose harsh in his throat.

"Check your course, Mister! Look alive out there!"

That fetched Casey up off the end of his spine, momentarily at least.

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"Bearing ought-six-three by two-four." He added unnecessarily, "She still doesn't answer."

"Check speed."

Spike read the spectra-dial almost unwillingly. "One hundred eighty-three and four, Cap. We've gained five hundred."

Brad's lips set grimly. "Blow tubes three and four."

The little mate's ray-bleached eyebrows went up like twin flags of distress. "That's all we got left."

"I said blow three and four, dammit!"

"Blow three and four, yes *sir!*"

The ship shivered twice and then hurtled on in full free flight. Spike shook his head, watching the dials. But Brad already knew—knew by the seat of his pants alone—that it hadn't done a bit of good.

He slumped back again, regretting both the command and the tone he had used. Spike was a good man, with a lot of experience. Spike's only trouble was thinking he could find the rest of the answers in the bottom of a bottle.

But he couldn't blame Spike for this, and he couldn't blame the good old *Stella*. Old, sure . . . the only reason he'd been able to buy her. But her plates had been laid back in the days when they really built 'em, and her hull was as sound as the newest of cruisers.

Most of his money had gone into her conversion. He hadn't stinted there, despite the Bureau inspector who'd called her a tramp and refused her a commercial license. He'd fitted her out with the newest and best of solar drives, to end up without a license or enough money left for operation. Which was why he found himself now with an inadequate crew and a bunch of landlubbers who could call themselves "partners." But they were partners who shared neither blame nor responsibility. Trouble was *his* baby—master and owner.

He turned back to his futile work with slide rule and dividers. How can you navigate when your instruments have gone screwy? When your ship itself is beyond control, lost in the tides of an unknown galaxy?

Captain Hunter . . . For this he'd left a soft Second's berth on a Martian freighter!

A soft voice behind him echoed the irony of his thought. "Captain Hunter, our handsome skipper . . . "

SHE had come in eagerly, without even knocking. She wore a scant lamp-suit which was completely appealing. Her skin was a smooth golden tan, and her hair was the color of honey. She wasn't beautiful, exactly, but she had looks and brains and a fascinating nebula of tiny freckles on a pert little nose.

He had kissed her once, in a weak off-moment. He'd been regretting it ever since. A captain can't fall in love; he has to maintain his distance . . .

"I've reminded you before, Miss Fairchild. Passengers are not allowed on the bridge."

Her lips twisted in a gamin pout,

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but the hurt showed in her eyes. "Passengers? That's not the way the articles read, and don't you think 'Miss Fairchield' is just a bit stuffy?"

"The articles say I'm in command," he said wearily. "What do you want, Fay?"

She slid one slim hip over the corner of his desk. She swung one bare slim leg with almost boyish innocence, She said, "Just our position, Master," but her eyes said other things, frankly and without equivocation.

Brad frowned. Did that mean the passengers already suspected? That the word had somehow leaked out? "Why?" he asked.

"Why don't you relax, Brad?" she asked softly. "Why don't you admit it's got us both? Why—" and her voice trembled the least little bit, "—don't you say it?"

"Why do you want to know our position?" he repeated doggedly.

She slid off the desk, still slim and provocative, but her face as stiff as if it'd been slapped. "It's nothing important. Mr. Mund and I got up a pool—a little bet on the day's run. We didn't know it'd be such a deep dark secret."

He looked down at his desk, involuntarily, and she was instantly by his side. "What is it, Brad? Is something wrong?"

He said simply, "I love you, Fay, and I'm in a spot. Isn't that enough?"

Her eyes looked into his, shining and clear. "Is there anything I can do?"

He shook his head. Her hand touched his shoulder, and then she was gone, but her fragrance lingered behind like a breath of clean air.

Love . . . and here he was master of a ship running wild!

HE got up heavily and went out on the bridge. Ahead was the growing ball of the unknown planet, and just beyond the speck which was probably a satellite.

"Take your choice," Spike said cheerfully. "I guess it doesn't matter."

"Not at this speed."

"I still can't figure it, Cap."

Brad said absently, "The new solar drive. They do that, theoretically, when the inhibitors go out."

"Theoretically, hell. I wish we'd picked a cooler system. And it still doesn't explain what mucked up our controls in the first place."

Brad frowned, trying to concentrate as he bent over the polariscope, but Spike continued. "So we're outta luck. But you know the way I look at it myself, Cap? I figure with my luck I shoulda been dead long ago—so all the rest has been gravy."

It was poor philosophy to hand a man who'd just told a girl he loved her. It was also a poor choice of songs that Spike began to hum with heavy irony. It was the "Spaceman's Lament," all the rage when they left Earth and which one of the passengers had played incessantly . . .

Fetch me a rainbow and let me ride,
Gonna get to Heaven from the other side . . .

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Brad tried to drown it out, but the mournful tune pounded maddeningly, and he finally brought up his head like a dog snapping. "Silence on the bridge, damn you!"

Spike bristled. "Damn yourself, Sir! If you'd stuck to charted territory, we'd be all right. But no, you hadda give 'em adventure. You hadda show that Fairchild fluff—"

Brad's fist lashed out uncontrollably. Spike rolled away from it with the practice of many a grog-shop brawl, then faced up to him, his seamy features regretful but determined. For a second there was only the tense sound of their breathing: the final hesitancy before the irrevocable act.

The bell broke it up. Not any cheerful ding-ding of a ship's chronometer—but the wild insistent clamor of the alarm above the speed indicator.

It was a sound few men had heard in space and none lived to recall, and they stared at each other speechlessly. Spike finally let out his breath in an awestruck blesphemy. "All our tubes gone, and not a lousy thing we can do about it. We don't even get the consolation of being blown to hell-'n-gone."

"There's *one* thing," Brad answered grimly. "Get busy on the speaker. Tell the passengers I want every last one of 'em in the main salon inside of one minute flat."

This time there was no argument or reluctance. Spike pulled down the overhead mike, and his voice became a ringing echo throughout the ship. Brad worked the polariscope for a last quick check, and then turned to go.

He paused at the door, looking back. "Spike, I'm sorry."

Spike nodded slowly. "It must be tough, your first command." Then he added strangely. "You know, I got the damnedest feeling. It seems like . . . well, like I'm remembering this happening before. Just like this, only a long time ago!"

What startled Brad was neither Spike's words nor even his feeling. Brad knew from his basic psych training that the sense of *deja vu*—the false recognition of the "already seen"—was a common illusion. What *was* strange was that he himself should share the same illusion at the same time!

THE group gathered in the main cabin was as unlikely a bunch of star-knockers as space had ever seen. They looked more like an average lot of tourists, and regarded themselves in the same fond light. For which, Brad thought again, he had only himself to blame. What more could he expect, having made this trip into deep space seem as casual as any vacation cruise to Venus?

Until now the distant stars had been left to the hardiest of adventurers: to the professional explorers and the professional exploiters, to the seekers of knowledge and the seekers of power—and to the human riff-raff who had to be pressed, even shanghaied, into service.

It wasn't the danger that had stop-

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ped the others, for the ships themselves had approached perfection and any housewife in a gyrojet risked her neck in traffic many times over.

The bugaboo was Time. Time was the enemy and Time was the barrier. Time was the factor in an equation which an ancient named Einstein had turned on the world.

The first leg of their journey, for instance—the jump to Centauri — had been only a matter of days. *For them.* Back home their waiting relatives and friends had already passed through forgetful years.

The smart young agent who had promoted for Brad had seized on that—while declining himself even to consider the "opportunity." He had sold the trip partly on the point that the passengers would "gain" an extra span of life.

It was a specious argument, of course—and quite deliberate. It had been used to minimize the real disadvantage—that they would return hopelessly out-of-joint with their time on Earth. That they would come back as ghosts from a forgotten age, to a strange new world and to families and friends who were long since buried.

Escapists. That was the only word for most of the people whom Brad faced now. Escapists who thought of themselves as fleeing the past or jumping the future—but who actually were trying to lose themselves.

There were twenty-two of them. There were women in search of eternal youth—or at least the postponement of death. There was the stout Mrs. Reeves, a wealthy widow, and the harried nurse who was her traveling companion. There was a spinster school teacher who had reached the age of desperation. There was Lola De Lao, an ex-video star whose medium was dead and whose glamour was sagging. There was Fay Fairchild, insatiably restless until she had found her man, and a homely young girl who had lost her sweetheart.

There were men to match, as on any cruise. Owen Crawford, a soldier-of-fortune of dubious past, played the field with an eye to profit. J. R. Jones, stout and obnoxious, boasted about the fortune he'd go back to — with compound interest. Sammy Mund was an amiable gangster who'd come along for reasons of health and income tax.

There was a wild-eyed radical named Myron Hoak, who believed in Interplanetary Government and waited for the world to catch up with him. And Dr. Bowers, slight and gray, who had gained a pension and lost a wife, and had come to see the realities of the theories he had taught so long . . .

These then were the people Brad faced as he made his announcement. He gave it to them straight, because there was no other way. He said, simply and grimly:

"Folks, we're going to have to abandon ship."

II

THERE was, at first, a stunned incredulous silence. The concept

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of actual physical danger was too swift a change from what the bright young promoter had called "the carefree life of a vagabond cruise."

But Brad went on, hammering it home. "Our main controls have gone haywire from some unknown cause. Our auxiliary tubes have all been blown, to no avail. The *Stella* is now drifting completely out of control. We're already caught in the tides of that giant planet you've seen ahead."

Owen Crawford blurted foolishly, "Well, you're the skipper of this bucket. Do something about it — don't come weeping to us!"

Crawford had been a source of trouble from the first, ever since their first fruitless prospecting ventures on two small neglected planetoids in Alpha-Centauri. He had insisted then that they return to Earth, but the rest had voted him down, with Brad concurring. He still held a grudge— and in addition his health was failing.

Brad answered him steadily. "I'm not trying to put off the blame or responsibility on anyone else. I got you into this and I've tried my best to get you out. Now I'm telling you what we're up against. We must abandon the *Stella* immediately."

Still that blank silence. Brad had half-expected panic, but not this. His eyes traveled over their staring, unbelieving faces. They had all been lulled by that false sense of security, that feeling of a world self-sufficient and invincible, which monotony engenders in any large space cruiser.

Widow Reeves even turned on Miss Kirkland, the schoolteacher, with quavering indignation. "That man at the agency positively *assured* me this ship was safe!"

"We must leave immediately. Put on your warmest clothes and the space suit which was issued to each of you. Take only such small personal effects as you can carry in your pockets."

J. R. Jones, the retired manufacturer and a tireless amateur duplicator, fixed Brad with his coldest executive eye. "This is an outrage, young man! I've got ten thousand dollars' worth of reproducing equipment in my cabin!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jones, but your life should be worth more than that. We're out of control. Our only chance is to leave the ship."

"Captain?" This was little Dr. Bowers, standing quietly in the rear, and Brad nodded respectfully. "I'm not questioning the danger, or your authority, but isn't it possible we may have swung into a free orbit? In that case—"

"I'm afraid not, Dr. Bowers, We're *not* free. We're still accelerating."

Dr. Bowers nodded slowly and soberly. Mrs. Reeves turned her indignation on him. "I *knew* a ship this old couldn't be safe! Just wait until I get back and —"

"You all knew the whole story when you signed on," Brad interrupted flatly. "This ship was licensed for only private operation, yes—but the Bureau's only objection to a full license was the passenger accommodations. She was as safe as the new-

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est and best equipment could make her, and whatever's gone wrong could have happened to any other ship."

He paused and added quietly, "If she weren't sound, we wouldn't still be hanging together at our present speed. We're already dangerously close to optimum."

"So what?" Crawford demanded. "You admit yourself she's taking it."

"I'll let Dr. Bowers answer that for you." Brad turned again to the little professor. "Our velocity when I left the bridge a moment ago was one-eighty-four, and still increasing."

Dr. Bowers' face blanched, but his voice was as quiet as if he were answering a classroom question. "There isn't any question, in that case. As we all know, the speed of light is the measure of infinity. As our velocity approaches the speed of light, time approaches zero. Which means . . . " he shrugged. " The Captain is right."

"Zero time!" snorted the practical Jones. "A mathematical abstraction!"

"Maybe so. But I, personally, would rather take my chances on an unknown planet in finite time."

CRAWFORD cut in again appealing to the others. "We've listened to Captain Hunter all along — and look where it's got us! If we stay with the ship we know what we're up against. At least we won't die from lack of food or oxygen!"

There were some murmurs of agreement, and Brad raised his voice impatiently. "Naturally I weighed all that in making my decision. My readings show atmosphere and enough vegetation to indicate some water and oxygen. Not on the large planet itself, but on the small moon beyond it. That's where we'll try to land."

"Yeah?" Sammy Mund's rugged face was knotted with unaccustomed thought. "But if we're going this fast, like the prof says, what chance we got kickin' loose in a lousy little lifeboat?"

"A better chance than we have remaining aboard the *Stella*. The lifeboat is a 15-G model, the latest and the best. Theoretically, it's good for any velocity . . . " Brad paused and grinned wryly. "We can only hope it measures up to specifications in actual operation."

They murmured among themselves, with growing excitement. The discussion had driven it home, but it had also brought them close to the edge of panic. And Owen Crawford was helping it along. Already unstable, wracked by some mysterious ailment which he had refused to have treated, he was working himself and his neighbors toward hysteria.

Fay followed Brad's troubled look and laid her hand soothingly on the man's arm, but he shook her off. "We'll never make it, I tell you! And even if we do, then what? You want to spend the rest of your days on some stinking little desert planet —taking orders from our noble Captain?"

"We may be picked up," Dr. Bowers said, but his words were empty of conviction.

"I still say we've got a better

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chance staying with the ship!" Crawford turned on his fellow passengers for support. "We've all bought shares in this joyride, and we've all got a right to the final decision."

No one backed him up, but the uncertainty was there. Brad checked it savagely. "I'm still in command here! I'm responsible for your safety, not Mr. Crawford. The decision has already been made, whether you like it or not."

Crawford yelled hotly, "That may go for the rest, but you can't shove *me* around!"

Brad's hand dropped to the flap of his blaster holster. "This goes for *all* of you. Warm clothes, your lifesuit —and nothing else you can't get in a pocket. I'll give you as long as I can, but when the warning signal sounds off you'd better all be aboard the lifeboat on C deck." His eyes swept over them, one by one. "Anyone who isn't there will be out of luck."

Then he turned on his heel and left them. Some were already scurrying frantically away, others moving slowly as if in shock, and Crawford was still expostulating wildly although no one would listen.

As Brad reached the corridor, he felt a hand on his arm. He turned, and Fay was in his arms for a desperate breathless moment.

Then he went up the passageway toward the bridge, and as he went the counter on his wrist purred like an angry rattlesnake. That was the one thing he *hadn't* told them. Some inexplicable radiation leak had made the *Stella* as hot as a two-dollar blaster.

SPIKE had already summoned the rest of the "crew" on his own authority. Beans, the lanky, space-happy kid who had signed on as deckhand, was gawking at the panel with excited fascination. Spike and Gloomy Gus were obviously fortifying themselves against the emergency. Their guilt was plain as they looked around, and Gus hastily concealed the evidence behind his back.

Gloomy Gus was an ape-limbed pessimist who served as steward and general factotum. Of Martian descent, he had an unpronounceable name and a morose disposition, and his nickname had derived from both. He looked close to tears now as Brad grabbed the bottle and sent it shattering to the deck plates.

"Gus, you go help the passengers into their life suits. Spike, you take Beans and check over the lifeboat, and then help round 'em up. Get everybody aboard and snug 'em down —and don't take any arguments. I'll expect everything ready to shove when I get there."

Silence closed in around Brad as they hurried off. Silence — and the weight of the odds he was bucking.

Ahead the planet had grown alarmingly, already crowding the screen. They were going to pass perilously close. If they *did* miss her, their course would take them between her and the tiny satellite that showed to the right. And that, as his polariscope had already told him, would

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be their last and only chance.

She looked no more than a tiny rock. But the major planet itself, bare and golden in the reflected light of the brilliant sun behind, was probably as huge as Jupiter. That would make her moon at least two thousand miles in diameter, and as he had told the passengers, there was some indication of atmosphere moisture.

But still . . . it was going to take all his judgment, and a lot more of luck, to gauge the velocity of the *Stella* against that tiny globe which would pass and be gone forever in a matter of seconds.

Brad re-set the alarm on the speed indicator; set it with as close a margin as he dared, and then went into his office for the last sad rites.

He was numb beyond despair now, almost numb beyond feeling, as he stood over the log on its waist-high ledge. He remembered with what exultation he had printed that first proud page:

LOG OF THE S.S. STELLA
Captain Bradford Hunter
Master & Owner

There had been few entries since then, and fewer pages. He ruffled the great bulk of them, thinking sadly that they now would remain forever blank, and then turned back to his last insertion.

14:21 *S.T.—Tubes 3 and 4 exhausted without effect.*

He picked up the pen and frowned at the chronometer. It read 14:23 now, and of course that was impossible. But impossible or not, it didn't matter.

14:23 *S.T. — Ordered Abandon Ship.*

Under that he drew a final, slashing line and signed his name to the *Stella's* death warrant. Not only the *Stella's* but his own as well; for she represented everything he had lived for from his earliest boyhood.

Outside the alarm bell once again took up its clamor of warning. He closed the log and left it there—perhaps to be found some day, in the incalculable future, or perhaps to remain frozen forever in Eternity. But this was the tradition where ships lived longer than men.

By the time he had climbed into his space suit, the speed dial had almost run out of numbers. He swung down the mike and barked into it hastily. "Casey! You all set below?"

Spike's voice came back hollow and uncertain. "Just about, Cap. Yeah . . . here's the last two now."

"Stand by for signal! If I don't make it, shove away!"

"But —"

"That's an order!"

"But Cap —"

Brad clicked off the mike on Spike's protest and took one last look through the 'scope. Then he stood watching the speed dial with his heart in his throat. It clicked away with hypnotic regularity and nerve-wracking slowness. Working up through the digits from zero to 9, and then all over again, reaching for that last final click of the last final

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9 that would shift the whole bank over to the ultimate Zero . . .

They needed every second they could get, because every thousand miles would count in the limited range of the lifeboat. On the other hand, if he shaved it too close . . .

He stood it almost beyond human endurance. Counting the clicks as a doctor counting the pulse of a dying patient, until finally time had run out to its last feeble whisper. Then he thumbed the alarm setting over to 185,900; yanked the mike down on its flexible arm and shoved it close in front of the bell.

"Stand by to cast off!"

He ran for it with death pounding at his heels. The last glimpse he had of the *Stella's* bridge was the broken glass cluttering her deck—and the vagrant regret that he hadn't cleaned it up!

THEY were waiting, two long rows in the slender arrow of the 15-G. Two dozen shapeless humans in their inflated, segmented suits: strapped and helpless against the pads of the acceleration shocks.

Brad's eyes went over them as he closed the port of the airlock and put his shoulder to the locking wheel. He was counting them as Spike reached down to help him swing aboard . . . and he was recounting desperately as Spike slammed the hatch and fumbled with the straps which would hold them both.

"I get twenty-five—including me! Somebody's missing!"

Helmeted heads turned as Brad's sharp voice rang through their earpieces. Spike gave him one startled look through his visor and swung away. "Gus! Where's Crawford!"

Ahead an anonymous helmet turned with a deliberate slowness that identified its wearer completely. "I tol' ya, Spike, but'ya wouldn't lissen. He said he hadda do som'p'n first. and I couldn't . . . "

Gus went on, defending himself, but Brad was no longer listening. He was marking the seconds as he struggled to loosen his straps again. Even Fay's anguished cry reached him only dimly as he pulled himself erect.

"No, Brad, *No!*"

Spike also tried to stop him, but he pulled loose and opened the hatch. His voice blotted out the protests in harsh command.

"Spike, you're in charge here. If that alarm goes off you shove! If you don't, I'll see you in hell myself . . . and no buts about it!"

III

AS he pounded along the passageway, clumsy and hampered in his bulky spacesuit, Brad's mind outstripped his feet.

Crawford must have gone crazy, completely irrational. Sure, he had challenged the wisdom of abandoning ship, and that Brad could understand. But not *this*. Not this risk of being left behind, of being left alone and deserted on an abandoned ship. No man would face that deliberately—not unless he were already beyond the reach of normal emotion.

Brad realized he was running

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against the same risk himself, but he didn't falter. It was a human obligation—and something more. It was an ancient and honorable tradition that still lived whenever ships foundered at sea or in space . . .

The Captain is last to leave his ship.

So he had his duty, but what about Crawford? What had been ailing him all along? Had he finally cracked now, or was there something else?

Brad remembered he had marked trouble after Crawford's name from the very first. He had been smooth and agreeable but it had been the pose of a gambler staking his last dollar. He had made a play for Fay, but she had turned him down cold. He had charmed Mrs. Reeves—and left her dangling. He had amused himeslf with Lola De Lao, and cheated at cards with J. R. Jones. All of that had been in character.

The trouble had begun with their second landing, at that little rock in Alpha-Centauri. Crawford had separated from the rest, contrary to orders, and then had sneaked back aboard even while they were out searching. Then he had begun his bitter campaign for an immediate return to Earth, his line of attack being to discredit the Captain . . .

And this was the man for whom Brad was risking himself, but still he didn't hesitate . . .

The Captain is last to leave the ship . . .

He rounded the last corner and faced the door to Crawford's cabin. It was locked. Or rather latched from the inside, for the lock was open! He pounded and yelled, but there was no answer. He thought he caught the sound of movement within, but he couldn't be sure. He reached for his blaster; then quickly reconsidered. If Crawford were close on the other side, the rays might reach him.

Frantically he pounded and yelled again, but there was still no answer. He stepped back and heaved his shoulder against the door—but his suit acted as a cushion and the door was solid.

Precious seconds trickled away as he lumbered down the corridor again and grabbed up a sledge from the emergency kit on the bulkhead. That did the trick. The latch gave with the second blow, and the door flew open.

Crawford whirled to face him, backed against the farthest wall like a trapped animal.

"Come on man! There, isn't a second!"

But Crawford's eyes only stared madly, and his lips moved soundlessly in a twisted, emaciated face. The voice in Brad's ears was Fay's, in frantic pleading:

"Please, Brad, *please!* Before it's too late . . . you've done your best!"

Then Brad knew why his shouting was in vain. Crawford's spacesuit still lay on his bunk, with its radio helmet. He grabbed one of the man's arms, motioning toward the door. But Crawford pulled away savagely, stll hugging the wall.

Time ticked on.

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Brad stepped in again and set himself for a hard, short right. But again his spacesuit impeded him, and the blow wasn't solid. Crawford only staggered, stumbling away around the bunk.

Then Brad saw the hole in the bulkhead where a service panel had been removed: saw the small, heavy-bound chest which Crawford had been concealing. His mind sparked with a sudden supposition — with a possible explanation for all their troubles—and he reached out to take it.

But something straightened him up, froze him in mid-motion. *Sound*: that dread sound he had been anticipating and now couldn't quite believe. The shrill, ear-splitting vibration of the alarm bell, amplified and re-amplified like the call of Judgment.

He whirled, and stared, and knew now he never could make it. His voice fought against the deafening clamor:

"Let 'er go, Spike, shove away! It's now or never!"

He didn't know whether his voice had carried. But he thought he heard a faint answering cry, a woman's scream against the mechanical bedlam . . .

Then there was silence.

Brad hurled himself forward just as Crawford, blocking the door, raised his blaster . . .

TENSION had mounted steadily, unbearably, on the waiting lifeboat. Menace had become tangible: somethng you could measure from one breath to the next.

The passengers had allowed themselves to be herded aboard, strapped in place, and had felt the beginnings of panic. Still it had been with that sense of unreality, that feeling of disassociation, which is common to those trying to escape a danger they don't understand. Then Brad's urgency, as he set out on his rescue mission, had given it substance . . . and they waited now in quivering suspense.

Fay Fairchild, after her first futile cry of protest, had slumped back, was staring blankly ahead. Gus still mumbled, disclaiming his blame. Spike sat tensely poised by the controls, cursing softly and bitterly under his breath.

But these were only a background to the unseen drama which their earphones brought them. They heard Brad's sharp, panting breaths as he raced down the passageway. They heard the desperate haste in his voice as he shouted to Crawford and pounded on the door. Then his grunts as he swung the sledge . . . and the long, ominous silence as he confronted whatever it was that he had found inside the cabin.

That, finally, had broken the girl's control. She fought against the straps which held her, pleading to be released so that she could go to Brad's aid. Spike himself was already half out of his seat, but Fay's struggles brought him back to his senses, reminding him where his own duty lay.

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"Leave those straps alone, dammit!"

"No . . . no! I won't go without him!"

Sammy Mund groped out from behind and pulled her down.

"Please! *Somebody* go help him!"

"You heard his orders," Spike growled unhappily.

More sounds . . . the grunt from Brad as he waded in, a thud and another grunt. The picture of struggle was as vivid as if they had actually seen the blows, but the outcome was as dubious as the silence which followed.

Then hell broke loose. Hell amplified and re-amplified, filling their helmets. Deafening them, stunning them with its shrill intensity until the sound was meaningless.

Spike knew, but still he hesitated. Above the uproar he heard Brad's desperate shout—then his hand dropped slowly to the controls by his side.

He heard Fay's final scream of protest as she twisted around again to look at him. He saw the disbelieving hatred dawning in her face—but he also saw again the grim promise that had been in Brad's own eyes:

If you don't, I'll see you in hell myself!

Spike's hand moved, and the outer hatch rolled back. There was a breathless jolt as the vacuum took hold—and then the spinning black chaos of space . . .

BRAD'S instinctive dive for Crawford had saved his life—at least for the moment. The clumsy bulk of the spacesuit had tripped him up again, but Crawford stumbled backward and a hole in the ceiling was the only damage.

However Crawford moved quickly and unimpeded, and he managed to escape Brad's clutching hands. Brad scrambled desperately after him, knowing there was no chance now to draw his own blaster, or even to get to his feet. Again Crawford's weapon swung down, again Brad's lunge thrust him off balance so that the shot went wild.

This time Brad managed to hang on, hugging the man's legs and driving him backward. Crawford chopped down with the heavy butt, but it glanced harmlessly off the hard-crowned helmet. The next instant he himself crashed back against the bulkhead.

The force of the blow stunned Crawford momentarily and knocked the gun loose. Crawford tried to regain it, but still Brad held on like a clumsy bear, knowing he was lost if the man got free again.

Crawford slugged and kicked and twisted—but if Brad's suit was a hinderance it was also protection. He ignored the blows, still hanging on in his wrestler's embrace, and gradually, slowly, forced Crawford to the deck by brute strength alone.

Then a quick twist, and he was over on top. His heavy, ribbed gloves found Crawford's throat with clumsy groping. They gradually tightened as the man kicked and thrashed; they kept on tightening until the

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other was still.

For a moment Brad lay there, swimming in exhaustion and the sweat inside his suit. Then he staggered to his feet. Crawford was still alive, gurgling for breath, but any thought of him was gone from Brad's mind. Instead there was only the pounding clamor of the alarm, and the desperate thought that there still might be time . . .

He lost his head, then. He ran like a madman back down the passageway, screaming against the gong's bedlam for the others to wait.

The airlock door brought him up short. It was locked and immovable, the red showing above. He looked at the outside pressure gauge, too, and read its message. Then he turned.

He turned slowly and deliberately, his face a grim and ugly thing behind the visor. His blaster came to his hand with a single purpose; his feet moved as if by themselves to a single thought. There was one last thing he wanted, before the end.

But there wasn't any end. There was only the gleaming walls of the corridor stretching interminably, like parallel lines that reached to infinity.

Space had lost its dimensions — and Time stood still.

IV

SPIKE came to, with the worst hangover ever. He felt as if he had been drinking straight gin — on a roller coaster. He groaned, but it only added to the medley in his ears and then he realized where he was.

His hand went instinctively to the control by his side; it took him a moment longer to know that the only sense of motion was in his own spinning head. They had already landed. They were sitting still and solid on a desert landscape, and the sun was real above the transparent overhead.

The 15-G had done its work well. Functioning beyond the weakness of flesh, it had sped straight and true to its appointed goal. Powered by its grav-grids, informed by its searching radar fingers, directed by its auto-computer . . . it had weighed all the existence factors of its human cargo and had arrived infallibly at the best of possible answers.

The air pump whirred quietly away and the boat was at rest, proudly waiting, as if to say, "Well, I got you here, safe and sound. The rest is up to you."

Spike stretched as if to attain the stature of his new responsibility. His eyes went shrewdly over the instruments and found satisfaction. Temperature, humidity, atmosphere, gravity, radiation . . . all within the limits of human tolerance. They might as well be sitting in the middle of the Mojave Desert— the problems were going to be the same. Food and water, heat and despair.

Another possible menace occurred to Spike as he opened the hatch and dropped to the ground. His gun was ready as he walked cautiously out of the shadow of the lifeboat and looked around. The horizon's curve show-

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ed the smallness of the world on which they had landed. Back beyond the boat a low range of barren rocks made jagged teeth in a brilliant sky. But there was no sign of movement or life on the floor of the desert.

Here and there was a giant cactus, twenty feet high with limbs like thorny spider legs. Smaller plants of another variety were scattered profusely about the boat. These were a mottled gray-green with strange jug-shaped bases and a single orange blossom like a mouth at the tapering top. The sand underfoot was vividly streaked, obviously rich in minerals—and the sun overhead was scorching.

Spike lifted off his helmet as he turned back toward the boat. Then an incredibly rich perfume reached his nose almost overpowering in intensity but definitely pleasant. It was a scent that intoxicated the senses and reached into the memory: the smell of roses in summer and the taste of strawberries and the coolness of his favorite bar, all rolled in one.

It was like . . . well, like being greeted by an aromatic brass band!

"How is it, Casey?" came Sammy Mund's voice, ghostlike and anxious in the empty helmet slung over Spike's shoulder.

"Talk about falling into a rosebed! Come on out, all of you, and get a whiff of this!"

The passengers staggered out, and he hurried to assist them. One by one they filed out, stretching wracked limbs uncertainly and blinking in the dazzling sun.

THE elder ones had suffered most, of course, from the brutal deceleration. Elvira Kirkalnd, the middle aged teacher, yanked hastily at her helmet and was promptly space-sick. Several others followed suit, including the once glamorous Lola De Lao. Mrs. Reeves was still unconscious, and had to be carried out.

The last was Fay, her movements wooden and her face a mask. She stood looking at Spike with bitter eyes, while the others gathered around.

Spike took one hopeless glance up at the empty sky and then faced their accusing silence. His voice was as hard as his face. "The Captain and Mr. Crawford didn't make it. The rest of us can consider ourselves lucky—so far."

The girl said flatly: "You ran off and left him."

"His own orders. You heard him."

"You deliberately, cold-bloodedly, shoved away without him . . . without even trying to save him!"

"He knew the risk and he was willing to take it. But not at the expense of the rest."

"You didn't . . . you wouldn't . . . even make a try!"

Spike straightened himself, and once again he seemed to gain in stature. He said quietly, "I thought enough of him to follow his orders, Miss Fairchild. He was a brave man and you don't honor a man like that with false heroics. You just do your job the way he wants it."

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He paused and then raised his voice. "I did what I had to do—follow my orders. Captain Hunter gave me command of this party but if you want to choose another leader now . . . "

Fay's eyes were empty again, empty even of the bitterness she had turned on Spike. The others looked at each other, still somewhat hostile but none of them wanting to accept the responsibility. There was a long silence and then Sammy Mund broke it up with a sudden shout. "Hey, something's burning!"

Spike sniffed the air. There was a crisp, pungent smell now, and not a trace of that heavy sweetness he had noticed at first. He glanced toward the lifeboat, but his nose told him this was no smell of scorched metal or fabric. It was something *animal.* As if—and Spike grinned at himself for thinking in these terms—the heat of mutual antagonism, the collective fear reaction of the group, had taken on tangible substance.

Sammy Mund thought he had discovered the source. He pointed toward the rim of hills. From the highest point of the nearest ridge, a slender thread of smoke trailed upward.

But Spike knew it was far too distant to account for the odor. In fact, the burning smell was gone now, and a suggestion of fragrance had again replaced it. But what about the fire? What had caused it?

It couldn't be volcanic; not at the very edge of a sheer outcropping of rock that rose so abruptly. And it was too small and concentrated for a brush fire even had there been brush to burn . . .

Dr. Bowers said slowly, "It looks almost like a campfire . . . or some sort of a signal!"

But who had made it? The little stranded group stared and muttered, until finally Spike spoke up again.

"There's only one way to find out, and we'd better get organized." He went on to make his suggestions, and since no one could offer a better plan, they accepted his leadership. Exploration was an immediate necessity, aside from the mysterious fire. The condenser on the lifeboat would provide only a minimum trickle of water in this atmosphere, and the emergency rations wouldn't last forever. The sooner they knew what enemies they faced, if any, the better to fight them . . .

MRS. Reeves effectively interrupted things at this point by uttering a shrill scream and keeling over. Spike saw the puzzled, incomprehending looks of those nearest to her as he went to her aid. Fay Fairchild also moved to assist the woman's nurse, and quick results with the vial from the first-aid kit confirmed Spike's guess. The stout widow had only fainted again.

But as she sat up, blinking at them, fear came into her face. "It *moved!* I saw it move!"

They all looked around, still puzzled. "That . . . it's alive! I saw it, I tell you!"

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She was pointing at the nearest of the pot-shaped plants. One of those strange three-foot gourds with the fat, rounded base and the slender tapering stem that ended in a bright orange orifice like an inside blossom. An elusive fragrance reached Spike's nostrils again, but certainly the plant wasn't moving. It looked like it had been rooted there forever in the brilliant sands of the desert.

Still the woman pointed with a shaking arm, and a very real horror was in her eyes.

Sammy Mund snorted. "Hell, Mrs. Reeves, you shouldn't scare us like that! That's only some sort of a screwy cactus plant."

He moved over toward it. Spike yelled a warning, but he was too late. Still scoffing, Mund had grabbed the plant around its slender neck and had given it a hearty yank. He let go just as suddenly and fell back gasping—but not before the rest of them had seen it.

There were "roots" all right: a thick fringe of slender radiating roots such as you might expect of a desert plant. *But the roots had been squirming, groping things, like the tentacles of some octopus torn loose from its mooring!*

And as the "plant" fell back to the ground again it righted itself like a child's Humpty-Dumpty. They could see the quick shifting of the sand as the "roots" burrowed in again.

To Spike, who had seen many things on many planets, that in itself was no cause for alarm. Even on Earth many life forms crowded the borderline between "plant" and "animal." But what had happened to Sammy Mund was another story. He was out cold—and he wasn't the fainting type.

As Spike bent over him, close to the strange plant, he caught still another nostalgic odor. It took him right back to Earth—back to hospitals and operating rooms and a siege at the dentist's. It was the heavy, sickening smell of anesthen, and so dense he could almost *feel* it.

He backed hastily away. It was as if the plant had responded to Sammy's attack with a deliberate defense of its own. Spike knew that even on Earth there were plants which gave off noxious odors to repel their enemies. But how about "plants" which could run the full range of scent as if at will? "Plants" capable of any odor from the heavy fragrance of wild roses to the heat of anger to a deliberate gas attack on a potential enemy?

Spike looked around. Fay Fairchild and Mrs. Reeves' capable nurse had taken Mund in hand and he was responding to the emergency-kit stimulant. The others were staring at Spike, awaiting his explanation, but his eyes had gone beyond them.

He knew now without doubt that they were not dealing with anything "botanical" in the ordinary sense—but with living, sentient beings. For behind and around on every side the "plants" had moved in closer, to form a solid, surrounding ring!

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FOR a moment they were all frozen into silence. Then, abruptly, one of the women screamed. Jones cursed, his fat face white with fear, and fumbled his blaster from the space-suit holster.

Spike's own weapon was already poised, but he used it only to knock Jones' gun aside. "Hold it! All of you!"

Gus said unsteadily: "Those things are *alive*, Chief! They've got us surrounded."

Spike nodded slowly, his eyes studying the fantastic circle of "plants": "Sure, but they may be friendly. Let's not fly off the handle."

Sammy Mund was climbing angrily to his feet. "Friendly, hell! There was nothin' friendly about that whiff of gas that I just got!"

"It was only defending itself. Their smell is friendly now."

And indeed it was. The air was fragrant again—but still Spike wondered why he had put it that way. He hastened to defend himself.

"Look, we know they're intelligent. At least they seem to know what they're doing. Let's say they use odor as a means of communication?"

Gus expressed his scepticism in an unfriendly and malodious phrase. The plants promptly echoed it.

Sam Mund said bluntly: "So what, pal? We gonna stand here all day and exchange smells with a bunch of pot-bellied skunk-cabbages?"

The "skunk-cabbages" had an answer for Sammy, too. They fell back along one side, moving with a curious shuffling movement as their "roots" slithered through the sand. They moved with amazing swiftness, and their maneuver was as definite as if it had been drawn on paper. They had formed a long "U" around their captives, with the closed end gradually moving in from behind.

"They're trying to tell us something," Fay exclaimed.

Spike nodded slowly. "They're trying to get us to move that way, toward the hills. Herding us like a bunch of sheep—but I still think they're friendly."

"And maybe they *ain't*," Sammy Mund insisted. "Any overgrown stinkpot of a squash thinks he can shove *me* around —"

"Put on your helmet again and you'll be protected. I've still got a hunch they're trying to help us."

"Nonsense!" exploded Jones. "I say let's get rid of 'em and go about our business!"

He raised his blaster again, but just as suddenly he seemed to be hit by a solid, invisible cloud that sent him reeling back. There was that burning odor again—the smell which Spike had subconsciously labeled as "anger." But there was something else, too, like a hidden threat. Just the faintest trace of a bitter-almond smell which made Dr. Bowers think suddenly of potassium cyanide . . .

But it passed as quickly as it had come. Jones gulped fresh air in gratefully, and a fragrance like an apology swept over the group.

"We'll play along with them,"

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Spike said decisively. "Put on your helmets if you want and keep your blasters handy, but no more funny business. I think it's worth finding out what this is all about."

Jones was still protesting, but he quickly changed his mind. Two of the "Stinkpots"—as Sammy Mund had tagged them—moved in on him with a sharp pungent scent that was as decided as a poke in the ribs!

IT was a fantastic procession that filed across the sands of that fantastic world. The wondering, uneasy little group of Earthmen —and a hundred, surrounding mobile plants. At first the "Stinkpots" kept their distance, like an escort of honor. But gradually one of them, somewhat larger and more brightly mottled than the rest, moved in closer to Spike as if to make clear that he, too, was a leader.

As he moved along, it seemed to Spike almost as if he were carrying on a "conversation" with this strange being. A steady flow of scent seemed to emanate from his companion, subtly changing in odor and intensity, but always pleasant and definitely "reassuring."

And the others following were also undergoing a strange reaction which could only be described as "emotional." The sense of smell might be the least developed of man's five senses—but it also ties in closely with the basic reactions.

Mrs. Reeves, for instance, had been hypnotized by the scent of lilacs, and had forgotten her predicament to dream of home. Jones, while still keeping a wary and disgruntled eye on things, found himself thinking of rare steak and fried onions. Spike was mentally enjoying a tall, cool one with his new companion, and Gloomy Gus was remembering a dark-haired wench he had left in Marsport.

Only Fay Fairchild remained unaffected. She plodded mechanically on with her eyes on the ground, wrapped in a blanket of shock and grief that nothing could penetrate.

Thus they moved across the shimmering sands, until their goal was reached like the end of a dream. They had approached the rock cliff directly below the spot where the fire still smoldered, and Spike had already marked the well-beaten path which led up to it.

But it was the opening in the base of the cliff which claimed his attention now. It was a narrow canyon, a sheer crevasse with towering sides —and it was also a breathtaking, tropical paradise!

Shadowed from the cruel heat of the sun, fed by a crystal stream which splashed from the rocks at the inner end, the rich soil of the desert had blossomed forth in startling profusion. Vivid flowers on slender stems, low-hanging trees with feathery limbs, singing birds and brilliant flashes of insect wings . . . it was, as Spike told himself with unusual awe, "like finding yourself in Heaven."

The others stood there for a long moment, blinking sun-weary eyes

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and pinching themselves mentally. It was too good to be true—it must be a mirage. But then they rushed on in, and knew it was real. They gulped down the cold clear water and bathed their faces and feasted their eyes . . .

All but Spike. The sense of responsibility was still heavy on his shoulders, and he surveyed the incredible little valley with his blaster in hand. It gave him the dreamlike feeling of having been here before, and that bothered him almost as much as the realization that it could be a trap.

Moving as if in a dream, Spike ignored the cool invitation of the brook, and skirted around toward a well-marked path which led away from it. He ducked under a low-hanging limb and then stopped dead with surprise.

Along the base of the cliff which hemmed them in was a long row of caves. Strangely unnatural caves, with large square entrances lined up in a neat, even pattern!

Again that feeling of intangible memory stirred within him. Cautiously he stuck his head into the nearest doorway and stood there peering into the cool, dim interior. He stood there a long time, until at length he turned and found the others had followed and were gaping like tourists.

"Cliff-dwellers," stated Dr. Bowers matter-of-factly. But then he turned and looked at the plant-creatures incredulously. "Still . . . how on earth could *they* have ever done this, in solid rock?"

"They *didn't*," Spike answered slowly. "Not unless they use blasters and cook over fires—and go to sleep in six-foot beds!"

V

SPACE had lost its dimensions, and Time stood still, and Reality was a memory long since forgotten . . .

Brad found himself moving down the endless corridor with some dim purpose he couldn't define. He knew it was something important; something to accomplish, and there was little time.

He hurried his steps, but it wasn't until he had reached the turn of the passageway that it finally came clear.

Crawford . . . He had to get Crawford!

He reached Crawford's cabin, but the door was locked. He pounded on it and yelled, but no one answered. And he put his shoulder against it, but the door was too solid.

A sledge was the answer — the sledge he found in an emergency compartment. The door wrenched open with the second blow.

Crawford whirled to face him, hugging the wall. The man couldn't hear him, because of his helmet, and when Brad tried to grab him he pulled away.

Brad swung at him, but the spacesuit hampered the blow and Crawford stumbled aside. Then Brad saw the hole in the bulkhead; saw the

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small, heavy chest that Crawford had been hiding.

Purpose came then, and bewildering recollection. But even as he reached out for the box, the deafening jangle of the alarm stopped his arm. He turned, and stared, and knew it was still too late. He would never make it . . .

His voice screamed desperately against the resounding chaos inside his helmet. "Let 'er go, Spike! Shove away!"

He heard Fay's faint cry as he dove for Crawford. They fought for years. They struggled savagely, with Brad unable to seize the blaster but finally knocking it loose. It was a nightmare in slow motion, a remembered dream, as he choked Crawford into unconsciousness with his clumsy gloves.

Then he lost his head. He ran back down the corridor, screaming for them to wait, until at last the airlock door brought him up short. The red light above and the pressure gauge were enough to tell him his doom.

But there was still one thing he could do. One thing he wanted, before the end. He turned, grimly and deliberately, and began to retrace his steps.

But as he walked the corridor stretched interminably ahead, like parallel lines reaching for infinity . . .

THAT first night they had remained in the lush little valley, drugged beyond fear by weariness and sun and a strange feeling that this was "home."

Spike still had the burden of command to make him cautious, but he gave in without much argument. There was no longer any question of the friendliness of their pot-shaped benefactors — and if the dead-end canyon were a trap, it also gave protection. The surrounding cliffs were high and sheer, and Spike himself stood guard that night at the narrow entrance.

The next day they stripped the lifeboat of all that they needed; and the following week was spent in fruitless exploration. Their world was bounded by impenetrable cliffs and chasms above the valley, and in the other direction the desert stretched an unattainable horizon against the looming globe of the major planet.

There was also the huge bed of ashes on the high point above the camp, and the caves themselves, but there were no other signs of what Dr. Bowers called the "former inhabitants."

That unexplained mystery caused uneasiness at first, but the presence of the "Stinkpots" was always reassuring. They indicated what fruits were edible. They contributed small animals to the community pot — by waiting in ambush with a swift anesthetic. And they were always at hand with cheerful fragrance.

Dr. Bowers studied them with interest, christened them with the scholarly name of "Olfacts," and concluded that their metabolism was based on chemicals which they absorbed from the soil, as well as their

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"smelling."

"They have only this one specialized sense," he told the others. "But it's coupled with a high intelligence and is remarkably acute."

"Yeah?" said Sammy Mund skeptically. "How come they understand us, then?"

Dr. Bowers put it tactfully. "How does a dog smell 'fear' in a human? We're chemical plants ourselves, with bio-chemical processes accompanying our every reaction. And while our own olfactory equipment may be remarkably crude in comparison—I am beginning to believe I can almost understand them!"

And as time went on the others, too, found themselves carrying on simple "conversations" with their pungent little hosts. Spike tried to put his own talent to practical use by asking the Chief of the Olfacts what had happened to the other humans who had made the caves—but the Chief evaded the question. As Spike reported wryly to Dr. Bowers: "The little pot-bellied sonuvagun just *smelled* the other way."

So the days drifted by, and merged beyond counting. Life was easy and pleasant, and it was useless to hope for escape or rescue.

Sammy Mund married Lola De Lao—in a fragrant ceremony — and they settled down to raising children. Mrs. Reeves still bullied her nurse, and wove innumerable table mats from palm-tree fibers. Spike and Gus remodeled the lifeboat condenser into an efficient still, and experimented with various fruits, and were quite content.

Myron Hoak worked hard and long at "converting" the Olfacts, and finally got his message across. The Olfacts had apparently always lived in perfect harmony before — but now they were able to discuss "government" and their arguments were both heated and smelly.

Young Beans, the kid who had always had star-dust in his eyes, was terribly restless at first and quite a problem. He was all for sailing off in the lifeboat, regardless of goal and alone if necessary, but he finally found comfort in the homely young girl who had lost her sweetheart. Another fragrant wedding — and a hasty one—propitiated Mrs. Reeves and delighted the natives.

Even J. R. Jones succumbed, when he found that Elvira Kirkland had talked herself out in her days as a teacher and was content to spend the rest of them as a very good listener.

Dr. Bowers had become recognized as unofficial Leader, since Spike's dereliction, for he was the eldest and wisest and could teach resignation. He married them, and consoled them; and studied the Olfacts, and worked out a "dictionary" where none was needed.

THE months drifted by, and soon became years—or was it centuries? Time itself had become meaningless where there was no place to go and no haste for tomorrow . . .

For all but one: the woman named Fay. There was no consolation for

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the grief she bore; there was no answer for her unasked question. Where others existed, she only waited.

But finally the dam broke, and she came to Dr. Bowers. He had been working on his Epic—translating the legend which the Olfacts had told him—but now he laid down his quill and carefully corked the tube of tannic ink.

He studied her with compassion and something of shock, noticing for the first time how white her hair had grown. "What is it, my dear?"

She sobbed incoherently. "I . . . I'm all confused! I can't get it straight!"

"Confused about what?" he asked, although he already knew.

"It doesn't make sense . . . nothing seems real. But the rest of you just go on and on, as if we'd been here forever."

"And perhaps we have," the professor said gently.

She straightened up indignantly. "That's nonsense and you know it! You're just echoing that silly legend the natives tell."

He glanced down at the meticulously written parchment before him with a quiet smile. "I don't believe 'silly' is quite the word, Fay. Their legend, like the great Legend of man, is an earnest attempt to explain the inexplicable. They—like us — must explain their existence in terms of 'A Beginning.' They happen to use us for their frame of reference, that's all."

"My frame of reference is *us*, too! The *Stella* the lifeboat . . . our landing here. We all remember that, at least those of us who are of the first generation."

"Yes . . . " he answered thoughtfully. "Yes—but were *those* the beginning? How about these caves, which we found already here? And an alien form of life which had already anticipated us—and had a legend to prove it so?"

She stared at him indignantly. "Now *you're* going in circles, like that darned old legend! You're warping things in Time and Space."

He smiled again, with gentle slowness. "Space *is* warped, my dear—and Time does the warping."

* * *

THE corridor. The endless, shining passageway which still lay ahead . . .

Brad moved slowly, trying to fight through the layers which wrapped his memory. He remembered Crawford, and the hidden box. He remembered the fight, the sound of the gong. He remembered all of this a hundred, a thousand, times over.

But memory was only an echo that echoed back, a mirrored mirror that reflected itself.

Still there *was* something—something ahead. Something yet to do, and so little time.

Crawford . . . the box . . . the fight . . . the gong . . .

Now he had it, crystal-clear! He had to get Crawford, before it was too late!

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But the door was locked; latched from inside. He got a sledge, and broke it open.

Crawford wheeled to face him, hugging the wall. He yelled, but his voice was lost inside his helmet. He tried to grab Crawford, but the man pulled away.

Then he swung, but his space-suit impeded. Crawford escaped, but revealed his secret. The box in the hole in the bulkhead—the box that held the answer to everything!

He reached out toward it, but a shattering sound froze him solid. It was the din of the alarm gong . . . and he was too late. His voice rose in a shout that knifed through the bedlam:

"Let 'er go, Spike; shove away!"

Then he dove at Crawford, who blocked the door with his blaster in hand. He dove with Fay's faint last cry in his ears, and he fought for his life with sheer desperation. Until finally Crawford lay unconscious, half-choked to death, and the alarm was a torment to drive him mad.

He ran back down the passageway, screaming for them to wait—but the airlock door stopped him short. The airlock was empty; the boat was gone.

He turned, grimly and deliberately, and started back. There was one thing yet to do, one thing that still waited . . . at the end of an endless hall.

* * *

"SO you see," Doctor Bowers went on, "why I take this legend of our little friends quite seriously. Time is fluid, and flows at a different rate for systems in different states of motion. It all depends upon the observer—on your relative point of view. Events which are separated by an interval in one Space-Time system may be simultaneous in a different system."

Fay frowned uncertainly. "But if you take the legend literally, it means that time moves backward and repeats itself over and over again."

"Did you ever hear of a 'phonograph'?"

Fay shook her head.

"It was a crude instrument used hundreds of years ago for reproducing sound . . . but let's skip that. Let's consider the *Stella* herself. We know she was moving in a four-dimensional orbit. We know that she was close to the speed of light when we deserted her. And we know that as a moving system approaches that speed, Time approaches zero—within that system, that is."

He paused. "This is only theoretical; in fact, my colleagues back on Earth have long called it 'impossible.' But let's say the ship ultimately reached super light-speed; in other words, moved not only from finite time into zero time but went beyond. The only 'beyond,' my dear, is negative time — 'backward' time, as you have put it."

Fay frowned. "Which means the whole cycle repeats itself, over and over again . . . including *us?*"

Dr. Bowers nodded grimly. "Including us. Including the lifeboat

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and the landing and all the rest. That's where the paradox comes in, the legend itself. As observers in another system, we can see ourselves coming, so to speak."

"You mean it's only an *optical* illusion?"

"Optical, tangible, four-dimensional . . . not to mention the odors with which our friends describe it!" He smiled and then concluded seriously, "It wasn't an optical illusion that made this cave—but a very real blaster."

The woman was silent for a moment. She raised he head finally, and her voice was low. "What about someone . . . who didn't escape? What about . . . Captain Hunter?"

Dr. Bowers said nothing, but slowly shook his head. And they sat there in the cool dimness of the cave, each silent and sad, until finally the woman got up and left, without another word.

It was two mornings later that the first shout of discovery came, from one of the lads who had climbed to High Point. There was a great stirring in the village and the commotion finally penetrated to Dr. Bowers' deep study. He looked up from his work just in time to see Fay Fairchild hurry past. He called to her, sharply, but she ran on heedless, her face transfigured.

Dr. Bowers sighed and gathered his pages and stood looking down at the first one for a moment before he went out to join the rest.

The record was repeating itself, stuck in the groove. The pen was retracing what it had already written:

It was a mere pin-point in space when they first saw it . . . .

VI

HE was running in a nightmare: a motionless race against Time. The seconds slipped like loose gravel under his feet, and the passageway ahead was an immeasurable length.

He was running to get Crawford . . . or was this a memory of something already done? His mind seemed like a mummy, wrapped layer after layer.

He had to get Crawford, before the alarm. Or did it go the other way? Had the alarm already sounded, or was it ahead? Had he still to reach Crawford—or was that behind? Future or past . . . or endless circle?

His feet plodded on, his mind struggled desperately. He had to get Crawford—but there wasn't time.

Time for what?

Time before the alarm went off. But the alarm had *already* gone off. He was too late.

Too late for what?

Too late to catch the lifeboat. Then what was he hurrying for? Because he had to get Crawford.

He reached the turn of the passageway, and faced the door of Crawford's cabin. The door was locked . . .

Why did he have to get Crawford, if the others had gone?

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He got a sledge and raised it slowly . . .

Why bother with Crawford, if the others had gone?

But the others *hadn't* gone. They waited for him to get Crawford. That was what he had to do, before it was too late . . .

His mind floundered hopelessly, seeking an out. And then he found it; saw it right before his eyes.

The lifeboat hadn't gone! It still waited!

He dropped the sledge and ran back screaming . . . screaming for the others to wait.

THEY *were* waiting, the two long rows of shapeless humans in the slender arrow of the 15-G. They had waited in breathless tension, and the sudden opening of the airlock door seemed to snap them out of a spell that was like suspended motion.

Fay cried joyously, "I knew you would come!" and tried again to get free of her straps.

Spike shook his helmet in befuddled relief. "Cripes, I thought you'd never make it! What about Crawford?"

What about Crawford?

Brad stopped short, in utter confusion.

What about Crawford?

Fay cried again, like a despairing echo: "No, Brad! NO!"

But Brad didn't hear her, and he ignored Spike's reaching hand. His mind was fighting the mists again, groping painfully through the wraiths of memory . . .

And then he had it: knew why he had to reach Crawford and what there was to do. But they were still fighting time—the sound of the gong. He yelled for Spike to follow, then was racing back again up the narrow corridor for the second time . . .

Second or millionth? It didn't matter now, as long as they waited and Spike was coming.

The door was still locked, but the sledge lay on the floor. He broke in the door with the second blow, and then stopped short for a startled second.

Crawford was facing him, backed against the wall, and the whole thing seemed like some weird rehearsal of a scene yet to come. He swung at Crawford, who stumbled aside, and the dreamlike quality persisted as he reached out for the chest revealed in the wall.

The alarm went off in nerve-shattering pandemonium, but he didn't hesitate. The others were waiting, and this was what counted. He hugged the heavy little container to his chest, and turned around.

Crawford had pulled a blaster and was blocking the door. But Spike was right behind, with his own gun ready. The gun chopped down in a short hard arc, and Crawford dropped with his blaster flaring harmlessly into the ceiling.

Spike looked down and said, "I'm afraid he's dead . . . " Then he took a long closer look and muttered unsteadily, "I'll say he's dead! He looks like he's been dead a million years!"

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But Brad had already pushed past. He had run out the door and was plodding down the corridor in clumsy haste. The alarm was still a driving madness in his ears, but he had reached the door that led to the engine room . . .

Then he had reached the vault itself, and he slammed the box home with a silent prayer. For two breathless eternities the alarm still held on. Then it died away as suddenly as it had begun, and the silence was a *ringing* echo.

Brad let out his breath in a shuddering sigh, and slowly retraced his steps to the outer door. Spike was running down the corridor — with Fay not far behind. And nothing, not even the bulk of their spacesuits, could hold them apart . . .

ON the bridge of the *Stella,* a great golden planet was fading from the screen. Spike shook his head and looked at Gus. "That was as close one, brother, and don't you forget it!"

Gus said gloomily, "Yeah, an' we still gotta land sometime, an' our control tubes are shot."

"Hell," answered Spike, "With that stuff we found in Crawford's cabin we can charge 'em again a hundred times over." Then he looked around and added hastily. "Hey, you lug, don't drink it all!"

Gus looked from the bottle in his hand to the glass on the floor, and then took a cautious glance over his shoulder.

"Come on," insisted Spike. "The Captain won't mind; the Captain is busy."

BEHIND the closed door, Brad was saying: "*Whatever* it is, it sure is hot! Crawford must have found it when we landed at Centauri, and that's why he insisted on returning to Earth. He was obviously hoping to keep his find to himself, instead of splitting it like we had all agreed on a share-and-share-alike basis. But he was crazy in more ways than one. If there's a whole lode as active as that one little specimen, it's going to be worth a hundred fortunes."

"And that's what made the ship go out of control?"

Brad nodded. "It was far too hot for that low-grade collecting box he had it in. Furthermore, he took away some of the shielding from the engine room when he hid it inside his bulkhead. It was already killing him, and I was just darned lucky I was protected by my spacesuit when *I* had to handle it."

"Yes . . . but I still don't understand about the engine room."

Brad grinned. "I've tried to make it simple, baby. You see, the inhibitors cut out temporarily when the drive builds up an overload. Only Crawford's stuff was hot enough to kick them out permanently — and solar energy did the rest. If we hadn't found that box and got it under cover . . . " He ended with a shrug. "See?"

Fay shook her head in pretty confusion, but snuggled closer. "All I

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know, darling, is that I waited a lifetime before you came. It even seemed to me as if we had already gone on without you. We landed in a desert, with a little green valley and some strange animals like plants, and I got old and gray and feeble . . . ."

She looked up suddenly with horror in her face. "But that's right! That *did* happen!"

Brad smiled down at her, and kissed her nose. "You're mighty pretty for such an old woman."

But Fay still looked troubled, and he added soberly: "I know I used up several lifetimes myself, before I got to Crawford's cabin. It seemed almost like . . . well, that I was in some squirrel-cage of Time, and couldn't get out. But the past doesn't matter now, darling. We've got the future."

"But it seemed so real! Did it really happen?"

"Who knows?" he said finally, and kissed her again.

THE END

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEWS

By P. Schuyler Miller

THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT by A. Hyatt Verrill. Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa. 1950. 248 p. $3.00.

One of the most popular and dependable authors in the early *Amazing Stories* was Alpheus Hyatt Verrill, the amazing explorer-naturalist-historian - archeologist - ethnologist-philatelist whose first adult science fiction novel (the Bleiler CHECK-LIST credits him with three juveniles), and his 110th published book, now appears just before his eightieth birthday. THE BRIDGE OF LIGHT was a feature novel in the Fall 1929 *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, when he had been busily turning out every conceivable kind of science fiction for three full years. It was and is in many ways his best work of this kind.

In plot, the book is an adventure story of the H. Rider Haggard lost-race type. Its narrator hero stumbles on an ancient Maya codex or book of picture-writing in Spain, and learns that it is the lost Prophecy of Kukulcan, the white "plumed serpent" god of the Mayas, describing the way to the hidden city of Mictolan where Kukulcan had left the survivors of the Mayan ruling caste to await his and their return to glory. The way to Mictolan lies through all the perils of Mayan mythology—the Valley of Death, the Tunnel of the Serpents, the Pit of the Great Crocodile, the Eight Deserts, the Whirlwind, the Demon Ixputque, the Fiend Neztpehua, the Realm of Hot Ashes, the Two Blazing Mountains, the Cave of Bats, and finally the Bridge of Light. The hero overcomes them all (the two demons are surviving dinosaurs, giving Edd Cartier a chance to do one of his best jackets for Fantasy

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Press), and is accepted by the people of Mictolan as the son of Kukulcan, sent by their god to carry out the ancient prophecy of their return to greatness. As Itzimin-Chac (thunder and lightning) he promptly falls for Itza, a condemned virgin of the Sun, opens a lively feud with the high priest Kinchi Haman, espouses the cause of a deposed prince, joins forces with an incredibly ancient sorcerer who initiates him into a number of lost physical and chemical mysteries having their source in radioactive deposits in the hidden valley, and works out a pair of prophecies through a minor temple revolution, Kukulcan versus Kinich Ahau, Lord of the Sun.

So much might be any action-adventure yarn of the lost-race school. The plus values in the book come from the authenticity of the author's settings, drawn from his own intimate personal knowledge of the jungles of Central America, and the feeling it gives for the strange civilization of the Mayas, with which he is equally well acquainted. Although no archeologist (including Mr. Verrill, I am sure) would insist on a radioactive clay to make possible the miracles of Mayan stone-carving, or call upon hints of a lost physical science of a forgotten pre-Indian race, who would deny that they make the story better? Here is one of the early classics of science fiction, nearly as entertaining today as it was twenty years ago.

THE COSMIC GEOIDS by John Taine. Fantasy Publishing Co., Los Angeles, Cal. 1949. 179 p. $3.00.

Time was when each new science fiction novel by "John Taine" (Professor Eric Temple Bell, Cal. Tech. mathematician) could be confidently welcomed as another landmark. Some of his magazine fiction such as "White Lily" and "Seeds of Life," now promised us by Fantasy Press for 1951 or '52, stands with the best of his earlier books, but changes seem to have crept into his more recent work which detract from its lasting qualities.

"The Cosmic Geoids," first of the two novelettes in this latest volume of Taine stories, tells the story of a galactic doom prophesied in a series of tablets from beyond the stars, contained in impervious metal spheres buried in Earth's most ancient rocks. As the secret of the tablets and the story of the doomed race of Eos are unraveled, a parallel fate seems promised in the suicidal antics of our own kind. In this framework, Taine as usual suggests many fascinating facets of scientific conjecture—specifically a universal linkage of life-energy with the other basic forces of the cosmos, in a unified field concept which leaves Einstein far behind.

"The Black Goldfish," the second tale in the book, is amazingly reminiscent of *Dr. David H. Keller and his* "Taine" stories. Here again the theme is biological, as in most of John Taine's latest work; a peculiarly Kellerish double-twist scheme to trip up an invading dictator.

These stories are really science fiction detective yarns of a sort, in which there are always two puzzles: the unraveling of the plot, and the discovery of the scientific pattern on which it depends. John Taine has pioneered in this kind of fiction. On the other hand, he blithely ignores the rules of detection ethics which have been set up by the professional writers of mystery fiction, and produces much of his mystification by blandly and blatantly withholding information from the reader. He is much too accomplished a scientist and too skillful a plot-twister to need such devices.

Lou Goldstone, a new artist to the field, has done some very effective illustrations and a particularly good jacket for "The Cosmic Geoids." We should see more of his work. Meanwhile, although the book is second-string Taine, it is still better reading than much that is being published wth more fanfare by major publishers.

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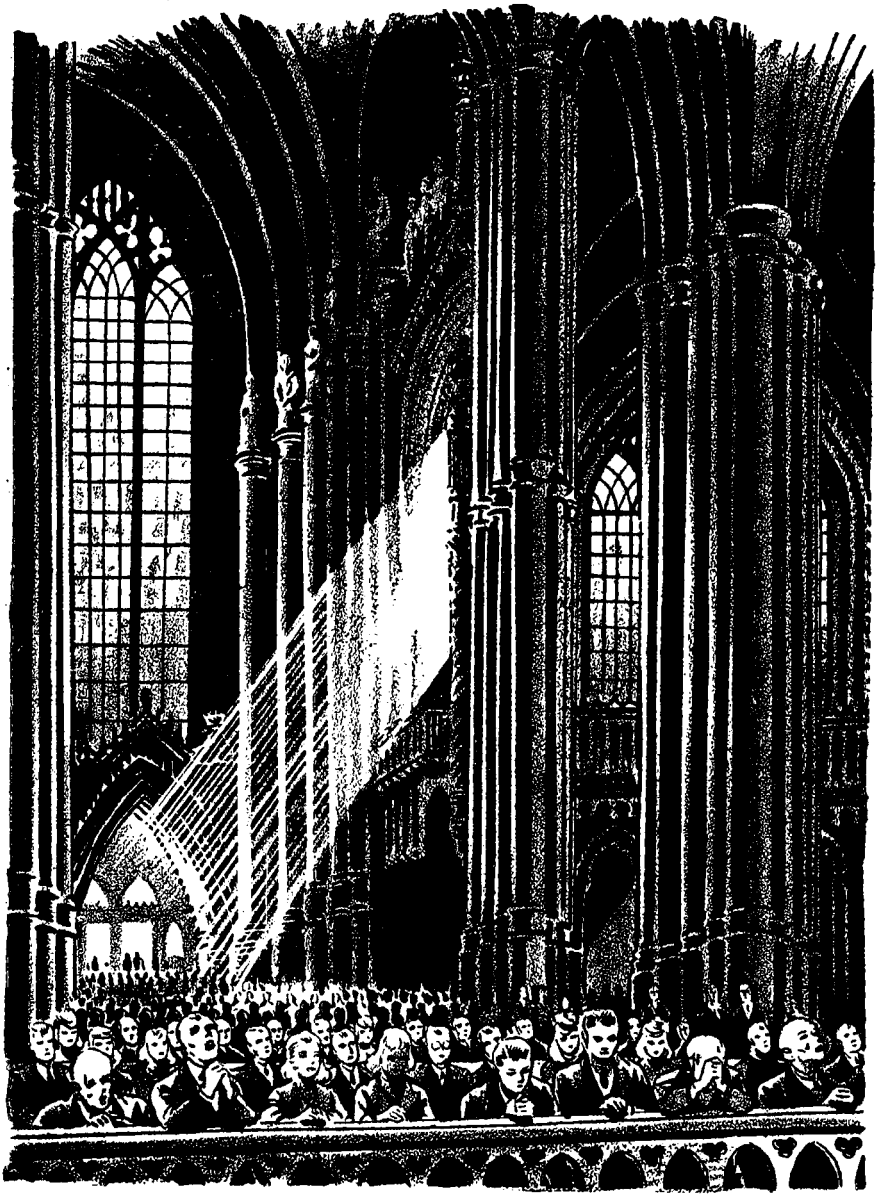
Illustration by Joe Tillotson



There was a holy look on their faces

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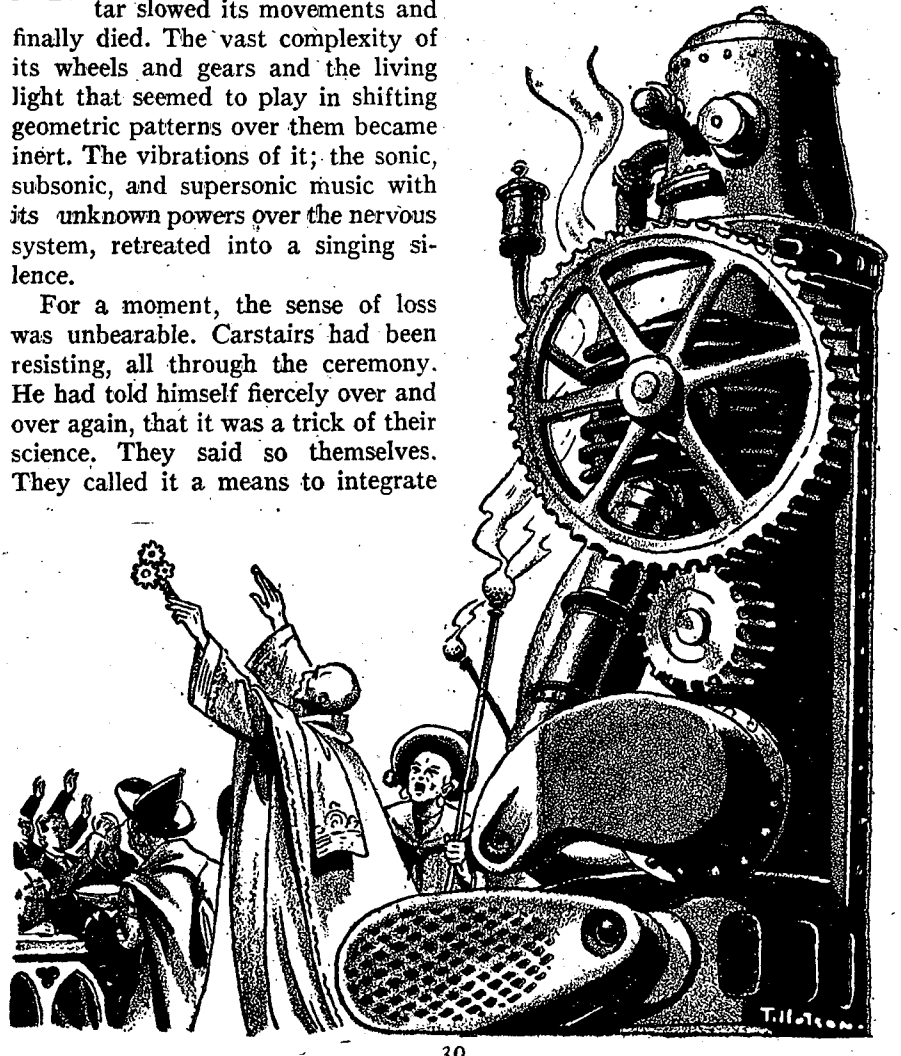
THE MISSIONARIES

By Poul Anderson

AT the end of the service, the great machine behind the altar slowed its movements and finally died. The vast complexity of its wheels and gears and the living light that seemed to play in shifting geometric patterns over them became inert. The vibrations of it; the sonic, subsonic, and supersonic music with its unknown powers over the nervous system, retreated into a singing silence.

For a moment, the sense of loss was unbearable. Carstairs had been resisting, all through the ceremony. He had told himself fiercely over and over again, that it was a trick of their science. They said so themselves. They called it a means to integrate



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Vraicoran missionaries who flocked to Earth to civilize and convert us to Mechaniolatry met with amazing success. When Carstairs was sent to investigate the new religion, he was horrified at what he discovered. But perhaps the pagans reacted similarly when Christian missionaries began converting them.

the mind to the Great Machine of which this one was only a symbol. If you yielded, if you believed, if you let the pattern of lights and movements and vibrations override your consciousness, then you would *feel* it. You would know—you would be part of that cosmic working, and—

Nearer, my Machine, to Thee.

Carstairs looked around him. There were many others like him in the great cathedral, men and women who had come in out of curiosity or at the urging of their converted friends or simply for the church supper that would follow. They had not yielded, though the strain of resistance was plainly marked on them. They were breathing hard, and looking around with eyes to which reality was only slowly returning.

Others, the converts to the Machine, filled the soaring immensity of the mission, and there was a holy look on their faces, something transcending space and time. They had been, for the brief and wonderful period of the service, part of a pattern which reflected ultimate reality.

Every man his own mystic.

Carstairs shook himself, angrily, and elbowed his way forward toward the chancel. The crowd was swirling slowly out of the dim vast building, some of them moving downstairs to the basement where the usual lavish supper was being given to anyone who cared to accept it. There was still music breathing through the air, but it was music only—sound—you could ignore it.

DUVAMAR Gerion stood in front of the chancel, bowing and smiling to members of his congregation as they went past. He looked very human, dressed in his flowing white robes—dark-skinned, flat-nosed, with shaven head, but human. The natives of Vraicor had evolved along the same pattern as Earthlings and—so they said — all intelligent life on terrestrial-type planets.

If one could go see for himself—but that wasn't allowed.

Damn them for that!

"Excuse me, padre," said Carstairs as politely as he could. "I'd like a word with you."

"Of course," smiled the missionary. "Would you like to come tomorrow and see me at—"

"Now," said Carstairs curtly. He held out a badge. "This is official. I represent the city government."

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that it was the mouthing of an angry child. Anytime they chose, the Vraicorans could obliterate this city, or and other on Earth. That they

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came as traders and missionaries, and obeyed all or most of the local laws, was simply the concession a man made in dealing with his inferiors. White travelers in barbaric parts of Earth had also found it convenient to be polite about local taboos.

"Ah— yes. Yes indeed." Gerion's eyebrows lifted. "In my office, then, *Grafric*—ah—"

"Carstairs. *Mister* Carstairs."

"Of course." Gerion excused himself from those with whom he had been talking, and led the way into a small comfortably furnished room in the rear of the church.

It looked like any ordinary study, thought Carstairs, and then realized with a sudden jolt that it didn't. There were books lining the walls, but they were in the form of microprint rolls that could be slipped into a magnifier. There were three-dimensional pictures of other planets under other suns. On the wall hung the symbol of the Machine, three small gears turning under the incomprehensible power of a tiny electronic tube. The same symbol, in miniature, hung about the neck of the missionary.

"Please be seated," said Gerion amiably. "Excuse me while I get rid of these robes." He shed them, revealing his supple black body, clad only in the breechclout which was the common Vraicoran dress. There was a ring in his nose. It was hard to realize that he was not some savage, that he represented the mightiest power in the known universe.

Missionaries had become so common on Earth in the past generation that men took them almost for granted, but Carstairs was staggered by the thought of the reality behind them.

Gerion poured wine into glasses, remarking something apologetic about its being only a fairly decent vintage, and offered Carstairs an excellent cigar. They were seated and talking quite informally before the Earthling realized that he was here on business.

"I HOPE we have not offended against any law or custom," said Gerion gently. "If so, it was entirely unintentional and we will instantly remedy it. Perhaps some building ordinance—?"

"No." Carstairs remembered that the gigantic building which was the mission in this city had been created in hours, a week before, by the fantastic machines of the Vraicorans. "We know your construction methods are sounder even than our own."

"Thank you. Perhaps some local man wishes enlightenment? I would be glad to visit his home and discuss religion with him."

"No. Though— well—" In spite of himself, Carstairs could not help digressing. It was too tremendous. The emotional impact of the service was still on him, singing and thundering in his brain and along his nerves. "This was my first visit to a Machine ceremony," he said. "I— it made me wonder. I'd always thought you were just another cult, one which happened to come from the

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stars rather than being homegrown. Maybe I thought it was some device to make Earth subservient to Vraicor. As long as I was coming here anyway, I thought I'd drop in and see . . . Now, I wonder."

Gerion beamed. "It gladdens me to hear you say so. Each organism brought into integration with the Great Machine, which is the Cosmic Whole, is one step nearer to fulfillment of the Universal Purpose."

"It all sounded like such a vague, even—well—silly thing to me. Why worship machines?"

"We don't worship machines as such, my son, only as symbolic of the Great Machine, as being more pleasing to the Purpose than mere organisms."

"You mean the Great Machine is —God?"

"Please." Gerion frowned delicately. "Do not compare paganism to the true knowledge in any way. The cosmic whole is represented, in the true religion, by the Great Machine. The most important way in which we can show reverence is by proper attitudes toward all machines, which are holy in that they reflect the Purpose."

"But *why* do you worship—?"

"Because it is true. However, if you wish to know the history of it, I may briefly say that the planet Vraicor was nearly destroyed once, by a cosmic disaster which you can hardly imagine. It and our whole race were saved only by the most extensive advancement and application of technology—of machines, if you like. Then the Prophet came, with the doctrine that we had been saved that we might spread the knowledge of the Purpose to all the universe and thereby hasten its day.

"Now you are a reasonable man. Isn't it obvious that only a unity with the Purpose and the Machine could have enabled us to make all those wonderful machines you know of—spaceships, robots, communicators, all others?" Piously, Gerion lowered his head and touched the gears hanging about his neck.

"I wonder—"

"Of course, I am putting it very plainly and baldly. The ordinary Earthling accepts the true faith without worrying about its intellectual complexities. To him, unity with our Machine is the greatest emotional experience in the cosmos. However, the more intelligent and educated element, such as you, recognize that the theology of the Great Machine is logically perfect, nowhere conflicting with the findings of science or sound philosophy."

CARSTAIRS nodded. He knew a little about the subtle and complex body of belief which the Machine church had evolved, but he could not refrain from a malicious dig: "There does seem to be some difficulty about points of doctrine on Vraicor itself?"

"Please." This time Gerion looked pained. "You are thinking of the Reformed Mechanical Church. A dissident and heretical sect, my son. It is too bad that the Vraicoran govern-

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ment permits them to spread their pernicious doctrines among the heathen. Fortunately, by the inevitable logic of the Purpose, they are not succeeding very well."

Carstairs nodded, though he thought that the somber garments and austere rules of the Reformists had as much to do with their unpopularity as any question of dogma. The orthodox Mechaniolatry, however, was winning converts by the millions. And, as Gerion had pointed out, in all classes of society.

We're the heathen right now, the dwellers in outer darkness. First there came the explorers and then the traders, hard-fisted men with a vast indifference to religion and an enormous interest in making money. We had enough brushes with them to give us a healthy respect for the power of Vraicoran weapons. Today the trading is on a routine basis. Earth is an economic unit of the Vraicoran hegemony, but we're still nominally independent. It's the missionaries who are busy assimilating us culturally to Vraicor.

"I don't want to hurry you," said Gerion, "but I have to preside at the church supper. Your business?"

"Ah— well—" Damn it, how did you state your business? It sounded as stupid as— "I'm from the city department of health, padre—"

"*Duvamar* is the correct title, Mr. Carstairs." The missionary's smile was friendly, but it showed his pointed teeth. "Unfortunately, it cannot be precisely translated. *Lesser Gear* just doesn't sound right in English. Surely the health department has no cause for complaint? The medical science of Vraicor is so far ahead of yours that—"

"Oh, it's a pretext. You know that. The mayor is dead against the Machine church. He says to get you out by any halfway legal means."

"I must talk to the mayor. These stubborn opponents, once converted, become among the staunchest cogs of the church. Why does he object to us? Is it on religious grounds?"

"No, I don't think so. He's one of the many people who wonder just where you're leading us, why you're trying to convert us to your faith, and what will be the outcome if all Earth adopts an alien faith. Cultural assimilation—"

"Oh, my dear fellow," Gerion laughed. "We don't care about your local customs. They'll automatically become sensible when you have the true belief. Certainly I'd be the last to insist that Earth's cosmetic standards should, for instance, include filed teeth such as we prefer at home."

"It's more than that. We can't get used to this idea of machine worship."

"I've told you before that machines are not worshipped. They are treated decently, that is all." For the first time, a look of genuine indignation and purpose rose up in Gerion's eyes. His voice strengthened. "It's a scandal, sir, an abomination, the way you Earthlings treat your machines. I have seen transport vehicles smashed, smashed to pieces through the carelessness of their op-

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erators. Once I even saw a bestial driver *kick* his car when it wouldn't start. And—pardon the expression—*junkyards! Machines left outdoors to rust!"*

"That's why pious Vraicorans buy up junkyards and salvage the machine parts?"

"Yes, though it's equally blasphemous to build a poor machine in the first place. If they are badly designed or shoddily constructed it is an insult to the Great Machine in whose image they are made!

"Even the subtler machines, the electronic equipment, are reviled and degraded. I have heard commercial announcements and coarse laughter transmitted by radio! When all Earth has the true faith, such blasphemy will be unthinkable.

"Earth is a pit of sin and heathendom. Why, the very first day I landed here, full of hope and eagerness, I saw an accident. Two beautiful locomotives had collided. There they lay, wounded, broken, steam sighing from their poor insides, and a crowd of chattering pagans was paying them no attention at all. They were carrying away some bodies instead, perfectly useless corpses. They were even letting blood drip all over the locomotives. It sickened me! I almost gave up in despair, but the Great Machine strengthened my will, and —" Gerion's voice became its gentle urbane self again— "my efforts since then have not gone altogether unrewarded. I was even influential in persuading your silly little separate nations to form an effective world organization which may end wars forever."

"That's right—your church does hate war, doesn't it?"

"Of course. It is a vile abuse of machines. The number of them which are smashed and otherwise maltreated is incredible."

"DON'T you care for life at all?"

"Certainly we do. Organisms are part of the Purpose. It was intelligent life which built the machines on the various planets. It will be intelligent life which serves and improves them in the future. We have, in fact, more regard for life than you do, with your atavistic allowance of inferior human stock to breed. How will you ever improve your race without deliberately striving to do so? Unless you become as a machine, you cannot serve the Purpose."

"I—see—"

"When enough Earthlings have become believers," said Gerion earnestly, "the scientific knowledge of Vraicor will be open to them. You will have spaceships, subdimensional communicators, powerbeams, robots, all that we have will be yours. You will become civilized. But—not before you can be trusted to treat the machines with respect!"

"Well —" Carstairs groped for words. The tirade had left him a little breathless. "Well—"

"Forgive me, but I am already late for the supper." Gerion was all friendliness again, eager to please. "If you

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will state your business, I am sure we can arrive at some understanding."

Carstairs collected his scattered wits. "It's about those suppers," he said, shamefacedly. "Now you and I both know it's a pure technicality, but still there are laws about food served in public places. I have to know about those meals. Just what is in them?"

"Mostly synthetics, of course. We also use a few Earth-grown fruits and vegetables and the like. However, the meat currently being served at this church is from Vraicor itself. It was part of a shipment for our military base in the Alpha Centaurian System, but since the requisition was found to be larger than necessary, it was brought on to Sol, and I was able to buy it very cheaply." Gerion smiled wistfully. "A missionary must watch his economics, Mr. Carstairs. We aren't rich."

"Ah—meat from outside the Solar System. That means from outside the state, and there are laws about that. Exactly what sort of meat, *Duvamar?*"

"Perfectly healthful condemnees. They were mentally or physically deficient, of course. They could not be allowed to breed, and it would be sinful to waste the resources required to support non-useful members of society. However they were certified free from all disease."

Carstairs groaned and clutched his suddenly whirling head. "You mean —Vraicorans—," the words choked in his throat—"Inferior humans — *you eat*—"

"But of course, my dear fellow." Gerion was honestly astonished. "It would be a sin against the Purpose to waste all that good flesh." He shook his head, sadly. "But I forgot, Earth is still a savage planet. You aren't cannibals yet."

THE END

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Rejoicing in the Moon's feeble gravity she sprang into the air.

Illustration by Edd Cartier

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The FLEDERMAUS REPORT

By R. Bretnor

With America's rocket and Russia's fuel, a ship could be sent to the moon, provided both countries agreed upon who was to man the rocket. Martin Fledermaus was the obvious choice, for he was psychologically unable to tell a lie — even to his wife Trudie!

IT is a matter of record that Martin Fledermaus could not tell a lie. It was established by exhaustive psychiatric tests and by a thorough Security Council investigation before his assignment to Project L. Even where Trudie was concerned, he had a complete psychological block against fibs, evasions, omissions, distortions, and unwarranted elaborations. After nine years of married life, he could tell her only the naked truth.

That is why both Martin Fledermaus and his report have disappeared.

Everybody recalls the secrecy that surrounded Project L. America had the rocket and Russia had the fuel, and neither could reach the moon without the other. Iceland was chosen as a launching site, and the operational details were finally worked out, only after seventeen months of acrimonious negotiation. And there remained the seemingly hopeless problem of choosing a crew to man the vessel.

The United States suggested an American and a Russian, but the Kremlin rejected the idea, hinting darkly at a plutocratic plot. (THE MOON, thundered *Pravda,* MUST BE MARXIST!) Mr. Herbert Evatt proposed an Australian and a Bulgar, and Russia offered to compromise on a Bulgar and a Ukranian . . . Then they brought Martin Fledermaus from Berne.

They took him from his workbench, his jewels and pinions, his tiny lathe. He looked like a Bavarian farmer on vacation: blond and plump, shoes too bright, suit too tight, with only the bulging spectacles that magnified his Delft-blue eyes hinting at the real nature of his trade. In New York, holding his soft cloth cap in hand, he appeared formally before the Council.

"Your name is Martin Fledermaus?"

"It is Martin *L.* Fledermaus."

"Do you desire to visit the moon, M'sieu Fledermaus?"

"Nein."

"But you are willing to go for one million francs?"

"Ja. For one million *Swiss* francs."

"That is understood, Mr. Fleder-

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maus. Now, what are your political views?"

"I have no political views. I am a watchmaker."

"Ah, a worker! What would you do if your comrades established a workers' and peasants' republic in your country?"

"I would make watches."

Martin Fledermaus made it clear that he could imagine no other reaction to political environment, left, right, or center — and the several members of the Council very nearly smiled at each other. Only one point remained to be settled.

"We understand you are a married man. You realize, of course, that you will be in great danger?"

"Yes, I realize it. But it is not important. My Trudie hates me. She has said so."

"Ah!" There was a general exchange of glances. "Why?"

"She wants me to tell her that I love her, even though one can not be sure. She wants me to say that she is beautiful, though it is untrue. But when I say nice things to her, she becomes angry. Twice I have told her she is not as fat as Bertha Bummelzug, and —"

"*C'est trop!* M'sieu Fledermaus, you *belong* on the moon!"

In less time than you could say *veto,* Martin Fledermaus was confirmed in his appointment.

After that, no time was wasted. Next day, they flew him to Reykjavik — and, shortly after midnight, several men with an "I'm a watchbird watching you!" look about them drove him to a glaringly lighted field informing him in whispers that even the Press had been restricted to the safe distance of seven *versts.*

The rocket stood there on its tail, needle nose pointing at the sky. Its lower third was hidden by a drum-like structure made of sheet-metal, on which the words *Russian Zone* had been painted in large red letters. From this structure, a staired scaffolding soared up to end in a broad platform a hundred feet above the ground.

They entered through the Russian Zone. They climbed some steep steps, and emerged through a hole in the roof. Here the escort turned back, and Martin went on by himself. The Security Council and Trudie and the President of Iceland were waiting for him on the platform.

There was no ceremony. The President said some inspirational words about Vikings; then he held Trudie's shopping bag while Martin kissed her a dutiful goodbye; then two dark figures led Trudie and the President down the stairs. Immediately, the Security Council admonished Martin not to talk to anyone about his trip, and gave him his final briefing.

"It is now 12:30. At 12:37, the platform will swing away, and all lights will go out. At 12:41, you will press the button that says START. Is that completely clear?"

"Ja," said Martin Fledermaus. He hastily shook hands all around, and, a moment later, he was boosted into the compact cabin. He opened the

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handbook that came with the rocket. Following directions, he strapped himself into one of two thickly padded, swivel-mounted chairs. He waited, thinking of the watch factory he was going to buy with the one million Swiss francs. At 12:41, on the dot, he pressed the big button that said START.

For almost a minute, nothing happened. His chair began tilting backward, bringing the half moon into his field of vision, first its tip, then its bright bulging center, then —Suddenly the moon exploded in his face; the world, with a fearful scream, shattered into darkness.

THE rocket was leaving the outer limits of the ionosphere when Martin regained consciousness. Except for some twirly spots before his eyes, he seemed intact. So, to his astonishment, did the moon. Apparently neither of them had broken so much as a hair-spring. *"Good,"* he remarked approvingly—and several minutes passed before he began to suspect that he was not alone.

First he heard a faint scratching sound over the rocket's steady whirr; then, a muted wail. Frowning, he traced them to an aluminum manhole cover with a big handle on it and a sign saying ENGINE ROOM, SECRET, KEEP OUT.

"No, I must not open it!" he said aloud.

The wail was repeated.

He hesitated—and, as he did so, the handle turned, the hatch popped open with a click, and—

"You!" gasped Martin Fledermaus.

Trudie was clinging to the top of a steel ladder, her stocky figure much the worse for wear. Her gay green hat had pancaked down over the carroty shreds of a ruined hair-do, and the handle of her shopping bag was clenched between her teeth.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Martin. "You must go back!"

"Even if you d-don't think I'm b-beautiful," sobbed Trudie, "I'm your w-wife!"

"But—" Martin was flabbergasted. "—but you hate me! That is what you said!"

"D-dunderhead!" snapped Trudie. "Pull me up!"

Once in the cabin, she dried her tears, repaired face, hair, and hat, and then, seating herself primly in the second chair, reached into her shopping bag. "See!" she said, exhibiting a shoe-box tied with string. "I brought a lunch!"

Martin had searched vainly in the handbook's index under *wives, passengers,* and *engine room.* Finally he had found a paragraph which seemed to promise a solution. *"'Excess weight'."* he read aloud, "—that is you, my Trudie— *'must be avoided at any cost. Five pounds may result in an error of forty to fifty miles at destination.'* . . . But what is this? Ach, listen! *'Because the possibility of excess weight has been eliminated, no provision has been made for its disposal'."* He closed the handbook gloomily.

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"They said I could not come," Trudie informed him, "but I remembered a little door in the bottom of the rocket. When the President of Iceland fell down the stairs in the Russian Zone, I jumped in. Those above knew I had gone down; those below thought I had gone up."

"Why did the President of Iceland fall?"

Trudie snickered. "I pushed," she said.

"I must report it." Martin eyed her somberly. "I would do it now, but because we are so secret there is no radio. Your weight will give us an error of two thousand kilometers at least. We will miss the moon."

"The moon," said Trudie smugly, "has gravity. It will pull us to it, only at a different place."

"It is your fault," groaned Martin. "We will land on the wrong side, which nobody has ever seen." And he buried his nose in the handbook.

Unperturbed, Trudie took her knitting out of the shopping bag and set to work. After some hundreds of stitches, she looked at the panel clock. "Martin! It is almost three! You should be in bed hours ago!" . . . Yawning comfortably, she kicked off her shoes and curled up in the chair. "Tomorrow," she said sleepily, "on the moon, we will eat the lunch."

Lulled by the rocket's whirr, Trudie slept her full eight hours. She awoke much refreshed—and saw immediately that something had gone wrong. "Martin, where is it? Where is the moon?" she demanded in alarm.

"Wake up, lazybones!"

"I have not slept," replied Martin sourly. "And the moon is under us, where it belongs. The rocket turned over at the half-way point."

"Oh!" Trudie was relieved. She rubbed her eyes and looked at him. "You have not shaved," she said.

"Why should I shave? There is no one on the moon."

"You do not know what is on the moon. You have not been there."

"Well, I will go there without shaving. It is too late. In three minutes, we must begin to land."

At exactly 11:14, Martin Fledermaus pushed the big button that said STOP. For a minute or two, there was no response. Then, almost imperceptibly, the first decelerating jets came into action, and a meter informed them that they would land in twenty-seven minutes and eight seconds.

They waited, watching it register those last remaining minutes of their voyage. When only one was left, they braced themselves. Thirty seconds—fifteen—*five!* And—

And nothing happened.

"What is wrong?" gasped Trudie. "We are still falling!"

The heavens disappeared. A thin white vapor shone against the ports. Suddenly they were through it, and light was pouring in—and briefly, in that light, they seemed to hang suspended.

Then, very gently, the rocket came to rest.

"Martin!" cried Trudie breath-

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lessly. "We are on the—" She broke off sharply. She stared. *"Martin! Out of the window! Look!"*

The rocket was standing on its tail, and all around it stretched a flowering meadow ringed by trees. Through the meadow, perhaps a hundred yards away, there flowed a brook and, under a shade tree on its banks, a dear old gentleman was having a picnic.

MARTIN clutched the handbook desperately; he made as though to open it; he removed his spectacles and wiped them with a trembling hand. "It is impossible!" he squeaked. "There is no air on the moon!"

"He sees us! He is waving! Now aren't you sorry you didn't shave?"

Painfully Martin closed his eyes.

"He looks so much like Papa Schimmelhorn!" Laughing, Trudie freed herself from the chair. "Oh, what fun! I'll bring the lunch. We can share it with him!"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going out, stupid!"

"No!" Martin bleated. "You will perish! It is a mirage! You must wear a space-suit!"

He pointed at the suits—bulbous, dully metallic, lobster-jointed, with fishbowl helmets and six-ply winter woolies to wear under them.

"Pooh!" said Trudie. "They're ugly!" And the hatch banged shut after her, cutting off his agonized reply.

The door in the Russian Zone opened for her instantly, and she stepped out into air that was thin and very fresh, like Alpine air. "Yoo-hoo! Here I am!" she called, waving her shopping bag.

"Ut hoy!" called the old gentleman, waving back.

Trudie's first step broke all broad-jump records and sent her sprawling. She sat up, surprised at the gentleness of her fall. Then, rejoicing in the moon's feeble gravity, she sprang into the air, and a dozen not-very-graceful leaps carried her over the meadow, over the brook, to the shade tree.

The old gentleman had a flowing white beard just like Papa Schimmelhorn's, and he was wearing a sort of pongee unionsuit with scalloped edges. He chuckled and bowed, made her welcome by his fire, and addressed her in a strange twittering language. When she smiled vacantly, he tried several other tongues in rapid succession. Finally, in desperation, he started making snorting noises at her through his nose.

It was too much for Trudie. She burst out laughing, and told him in English that he sounded like a seal. "A seal," she said, imitating flippers. "A seal out of the water."

He gave her an astounded glance, and muttered "Incredible!" twice under his breath.

"Why?" said Trudie. "Why should I not speak English?"

"But it is an *earth* language!"

"Of course!" laughed Trudie. "We just came from there."

"How strange! I thought mine was the only expedition."

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"That's what Martin and I thought about ours!" She looked around. "I do not see your rocket."

"My space-ship? Oh, I let my secretary take it off for a spin. She's just learning to drive, you see. She'll be back presently. Anyhow—" He looked downcast. "I hope you had better luck than I did. It's as much as one's life is worth to do any work down there nowadays."

Trudie remarked politely that his work must be very interesting; and he said that it was, but that it had its depressing aspects too. Then he informed her that he was Professor of Galactic Anthropology at a university with a very funny name.

Trudie was impressed. "I'm just Mrs. Trudie Fledermaus," she admitted modestly, "from Berne."

"From *where?*"

"From Berne," repeated Trudie. "In Switzerland."

The Professor's mouth popped open. "You don't mean that you're *from the earth?*"

"But naturally!" said Trudie. "Where else—?" She stopped; she gulped; she goggled at him. "You don't mean—*that you aren't?*"

Soberly, the Professor inclined his head.

"*Oooh!*" said Trudie in a very small voice.

"There, there!" The Professor patted her shoulder. "Don't be alarmed."

"I'm n-not alarmed. I—I think you're very nice anyhow!"

"Thank you." The Professor bowed gravely. "I should have observed more closely. Naturally, with *that* figure—"

But here his remarks on Trudie's anatomy were interrupted by a faint clatter from the rocket. He turned his head. "My word! What's that?"

Martin had opened the upper door. He had lowered his equipment—Geiger counters, gadgets for measuring gravitation, cases for mineral specimens. And now, complete with helmet, he was climbing ponderously down a flexible metal ladder.

"That? That's Martin," Trudie explained. "He's my husband."

"But—" The Professor seemed confused. "—but why is he in a shell?"

Trudie giggled. "That is his space-suit. The handbook said there was no air on the moon."

"But there's air here, at the picnic grounds. Our force field at the top of the crater keeps it in. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to rest here on my trips."

"Martin will wear the space-suit anyhow." She sighed. "That is his character. If he had been different, they would not have chosen him."

The Professor coughed. "I'd certainly like to meet him. He sounds very unusual."

Trudie declared that Martin

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would probably refuse to join them, because he was forbidden to talk to anyone about his trip. "But *I'm* not!" she added brightly. "I'm a stowaway!"

The Professor was delighted. "I know what we'll do," he chuckled. We'll wait lunch for him, just in case. I can listen while we're waiting."

So, while Martin puttered around with his instruments, Trudie told the whole story from beginning to end, shedding a tear or two when she described his persistent refusal to tell her that he loved her.

AS Trudie talked, Martin's movements became slower and slower. Just as she finished her recital, they ceased entirely, and he subsided to the ground.

She jumped up, frightened, and the Professor hastened to reassure her. "I thought that would happen," he remarked. "It's the heat. We'll decant him, and he'll be all right in no time."

They leaped to Martin's side, and Trudie's new acquaintance stripped him of his space-suit. Then they carried him to the brook and revived him; and, when he tried feebly to run away, the Professor courteously restrained him.

"Silly!" Trudie was annoyed. "Why did you try to run from the Herr Doktor Professor?"

"I did not know he was a Herr Doktor Professor," said Martin sullenly.

"He is famous!" announced Trudie. "He is Professor of . . . of . . . "

"Of Galactic Anthropology," supplied the Professor, "in the University of Mirta-Morzula. We're only a few light-years away."

"I do not believe it," said Martin truculently. "He is competing for my one million Swiss francs. Or else he is a spy. I shall report it."

"You should be ashamed!" Trudie instantly reproved him. "You would not speak that way to Papa Schimmelhorn!"

"Now, now . . ." The Professor raised a pacifying hand. "It doesn't matter. He'll feel better after lunch."

Trudie remembered her own keen appetite. "Yes, yes, let's have lunch now!" She produced the shoebox. "Look! I have cheese, sausage, bread and butter, beer! Also *apfelstrudel!*" . . . And the Professor, rummaging in a hamper, contributed a flagon of wine from Mirta-Morzula.

Martin sulked and refused to eat anything, but Trudie immediately decided that it was the finest picnic she had ever attended. At the first sip of the wine, she threw back her head and yodeled; at the second, she disposed of the unopened beer bottles by pelting the rocket with them; at the third, the Professor stopped her gently, and started to tell her about his

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native planet.

Trudie listened silently. After a while, she sighed. "My!" she said wistfully. "Mirta-Morzula is just like Switzerland—only more so!"

"I'll show you some pictures of it when my secretary gets back," promised the Professor. "Perhaps you'll be able to visit us someday. I'm sure you'd enjoy it."

Trudie clapped her hands. "Oh, I'd love to! Martin never takes me anywhere." She gave her husband a contemptuous look. "If I were as pretty as Alois Pfaffenberger's wife—"

"But you are not," asserted Martin. "And even if you were it would not matter. There is no such place as Mirta-Morzula. When we return to Iceland, I shall report—"

"Pardon the play on words," put in the Professor, "but how on earth do you expect to return to Iceland?"

"What do you mean?" blurted Martin.

"I mean that the original error which landed you on the wrong side of the moon will almost certainly carry you, not to Iceland, but to the immediate vicinity of Yomsk, Siberia."

"It will make no difference. Everyone will believe me."

"Yomsk," persisted the Professor, "is known as the capital of the salt mines."

"Does that matter?"

"It might—especially to Trudie. By this time, people down on earth probably know that she's with you. Have you listened to the news to see how they're reacting?"

Martin explained why they didn't have a radio; and then, from his hamper, the Professor took something that looked like a thin platinum watch without a stem. He placed it on the ground beside him; and Martin saw that its crystal was opaque, showing neither hands nor numerals.

"What is it?" asked Trudie curiously.

"This? Oh, it tells the time among other things." Pressing a tiny stud, the Professor said, "Time, please. Berne, Switzerland, Earth;" and a dial, appearing suddenly, told him it was 2:27 P.M. "And now," he declared, as Martin gaped, "we will have the news . . . Berne newscast, please. Not older than one hour."

The watch began emitting sharp, metallic clicks, and the Professor apologized because, as it wasn't the very latest model, they would have to wait a minute. "The electronic part's all right," he said, "but the clockwork isn't very good —only seven hundred and seventeen jewels."

Martin made an odd gargling noise —and just then a loud voice filled the air, announcing the latest news from Berne.

"Martin! Martin!" exclaimed Trudie. "It is the nephew of Papa

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Schimmelhorn—the one with adenoids! *Now* do you believe in Mirta-Morzula?"

"Project L," said Papa Schimmelhorn's nephew in ringing tones, "precipitated a new Security Council crisis early today when Russia bluntly accused a Western power of lunar aggression. Mrs. Gertrude Fledermaus, according to the Russians, did not simply disappear! Instead, the rocket-pilot's wife was smuggled aboard as agent of an international monopolistic cartel to which her father's firm belongs!"

"B-but my papa makes only cuckoo-clocks!" interposed Trudie in a stricken voice. And Martin looked utterly bewildered.

"The Kremlin's delegate," continued the adenoidal nephew, "shouted his charges after vetoing the one million Swiss francs which Fledermaus was to have been paid for the epoch-making flight! He accused the watchmaker of conniving with reactionary elements in a plot to circumvent his own inability to tell a lie! Angrily, he demanded drastic punishment for both man and wife when they return!"

Aghast, Martin and Trudie learned that the Russians believed the moon to be chock-full of uranium, that they refused to credit any reports to the contrary, that their astronomers had detected the disappearance of the rocket and that betrayers of the toiling masses could not hope to hide much longer behind the deceptively innocent faces of cuckoo-clocks.

Then, sympathetically, the Professor switched the program off and suggested that perhaps they'd better have another glass of wine.

THERE was a stunned silence. Trudie drained her glass at a gulp and reached for a refill. Martin, a glazed look in his eye, exceped without protest and started sipping mechanically. The Professor tactfully rearranged the contents of his hamper.

Suddenly Trudie pointed an accusing finger at her husband. "Look at him!" she cried. "We cannot go back—except to the salt mines! There is nowhere else to go! It is all his fault! And he sits there doing nothing!"

"There isn't much he can do, is there?" ventured the Professor.

"If he loved me, he would think of something!"

Ignoring her, Martin extended his glass; and the Professor, leaning over to fill it, remarked, "Good wine, isn't it?"

"It is out of this world!" admitted Martin. He cast an envious glance at the Professor's timepiece, which seemed to trouble him. "Seven-hundred and seventeen jewels!" he muttered. "No, no! Impossible! If I could learn to make a watch like that—"

"There!" shouted Trudie, leaping to her feet. "Before, you would not listen! We can go to Mirta-Morzula, where they have no salt

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mines and make wonderful watches! We can leave this foolish rocket here on the moon, and go back with the Herr Professor!"

The Professor hemmed and hawed, and mumbled that he was really dreadfully sorry—but that it would be out of the question.

Trudie was astounded. "But you invited us!" she argued shrilly. "You said that we could visit you! If you do not have room, we can wait here and come later."

"It isn't just the matter of room." The Professor fumbled apologetically. "We probably could manage to squeeze you in. It's simply that—well, you *are* earth people—and things being as they are—When I invited you, I said perhaps *someday* . . ."

Martin frowned painfully. He stood up with the air of one who has made a grave decision. "It is of no consequence!" he stated. "I still do not believe in Mirta-Morzula. We have heard the news—" He pointed at the watch. "—only through that thing, which is probably a clever trick. Maybe it is true that I will never get the one million Swiss francs for my watch factory, and that we will be severely punished. But we must go back. I must keep my promise: I must report."

With that, he bowed stiffly to the Professor, turned, and moved off toward his instruments.

Trudie watched him go—and two large tears started to navigate her nose. She whirled on the Professor furiously. "Why?" she demanded. "Why can't he be like—like other men? Even P-Papa Sch-Schimmelhorn, eighty years old, tells his wife that she is b-b-beautiful! *He* wouldn't t-take *her* b-b-back to earth! He l-loves her!"

She sat down, and blew her nose. "Y-you m-m-men are all alike!" she sobbed. "Y-you're just as bad as Martin is! You w-won't let us c-c-come to Mirta-Morzula because you think we're s-spies!"

"Spies?" echoed the Professor. "Dear me, no! I'm sure you aren't and I do sympathize with you—I really do." Sadly, he took her hand in his. "You mustn't think me cruel if I advise you—well, to accept this philosophically. It isn't that I don't *want* you to come to Mirta-Morzula, you see. It's just that we do things so differently. We don't fight wars, for instance—"

"We don't either!" said Trudie. "We're Swiss!"

"I know, I know. But that isn't quite the point. We do other things differently, too." He paused uncomfortably. "Goodness me! This isn't going to be at all easy to explain. You're probably pretty enough by primitive standards, and I certainly don't want to hurt your feelings. Promise me you won't be offended?"

Trudie nodded dubiously.

"Well," continued the Professor, "even if you were spies we wouldn't worry very much, because we've

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learned to take care of ourselves quite nicely. And, as far as earth germs are concerned, we could disinfect you in a jiffy. But we do have one rule, that's inflexible. It's one of the main reasons why we get along so well together, and we can't possibly risk having anyone around who can't conform to it. On Mirta-Morzula, my dear, every husband has to be in love with his wife, and he has to think she's beautiful—and naturally they all do, because all our women are perfectly ravishing. Of course, our standards are more refined than yours, but—Well, just wait till you meet my secretary. Then you'll understand."

Trudie's lower lip trembled. She drew her hand away. For a moment, imagining a planetful of pin-up girls, she registered despair. Then, "I'm not so bad!" she said defiantly. "I am more beautiful than Bertha Bummelzug."

"I'm *sure* you are."

"Also," said Trudie under her breath, "I am smarter." And her eyes narrowed craftily.

IT didn't take Martin long to finish the Fledermaus Report. The instruments declared unanimously that the moon was made of gypsum, and that there wasn't anything there worth having, so he carried all the equipment back into the rocket, wrote the report, and stowed everything away according to instructions. Having done so, he leaped clumsily back across the meadow to rejoin Trudie and the Professor.

"*Well,* my so-called husband!" Trudie greeted him with a vicious smile. "Would you like to know why we cannot go to Mirta-Morzula?"

"We cannot go because it is not in the contract."

"No, *dumkopf!* We cannot go because you do not love me! Because you do not think that I am beautiful! Because stupid husbands like you are not allowed on Mirta-Morzula! Ask the Professor! Ask him! He will tell you it is true!"

"It makes no difference," said Martin wearily. "In one hour, we must go back. The handbook says so."

Trudie controlled herself with a very obvious effort. Presently, she sighed resignedly. Then she began to search her shopping bag.

"What are you looking for?" asked Martin.

"My knitting. I—I can knit while we are waiting." She brought her hand out empty. "But I have left it in the cabin."

"I will get it for you." He started to his feet.

"You will get nothing for me, Martin Fledermaus!" snapped Trudie, rising hurriedly. "Anyhow, I —I need the walk."

"I shall never understand women," Martin remarked to the Professor, as she vanished in the

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rocket. "Are they like that in Mirta-Morzula?"

The Professor assured him that they were not, and that it was undoubtedly because the law forbade all husbands not to love their wives. Then Martin asked how such a law could be enforced, and he explained why it didn't have to be.

They saw Trudie emerge; and Martin said that it hadn't taken her very long. "Where is your knitting?" he yelled, as she jumped toward them.

Her answer was drowned in a terrific blast. The ground shook. Smoke billowed over the meadow.

And, as it cleared, they saw that the rocket was no longer there.

"Something happened!" remarked Trudie innocently. "It is very lucky that there is a minute after lucky push the button. Now we will *have* to go to Mirta-Morzula."

Martin stared in horror at the rocket's vapor trail in the sky, his face a mirror of intense inner conflict.

"It won't do any good," Trudie told him triumphantly. "You cannot bring it back!"

He shuddered. "I did not do it! It is not I who broke the contract! The Herr Doktor Professor is a witness!" For a long minute, he sat wrapped in thought. Then, rather gradually, his frame relaxed. He shrugged. His gaze drifted again to the watch. "Yes," he conceded, "maybe Mirta-Morzula will be better than the salt-mines—if there is a Mirta-Morzula."

"Martin!" Trudie giggled happily. "I knew you'd—*Oh!*"

She broke off. A hollow groan had come from the Professor, and he was shaking his head tragically. "My dear Mrs. Fledermaus!" he whispered, in distress. "Do you realize what you have *done?* I told you that you could *not* come to Mirta-Morzula!"

"But we've got to!" squealed Trudie. "There's nowhere else!"

"Nowhere else?" The Professor started pacing distractedly up and down. "There are lots of places. There's Mars, of course—but you'd dry out there in no time. And I'm afraid the Venusians, with their seven sexes, would be much too much for you. The climate on Jupiter's moons is quite impossible, and Saturn's atmosphere is all ammonia. You can't stay here, because we lock it up at night. And if I took you back to earth—"

"If—if we came back without the rocket—" Martin's eyes became as large as saucers. "—*nobody* would believe us!"

"They would believe the Russians!" moaned Trudie.

"And I'm afraid you wouldn't last very long," said the Professor, "so I couldn't take you back anyhow unless I wanted to break every regulation in the book. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Whatever will I do with you? I wish my secretary would hurry back. She'd have some sort of idea, I'm sure."

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He pulled nervously at his beard. "But then she might remind me of Regulation Sixty-seven — and I don't even want to think of it. *'Alien life-forms which must be abandoned in circumstances under which they cannot be expected to survive will be painlessly put out of their misery.'* No, that won't do at all." He paused. "Mr. Fledermaus, are you *quite sure* that you don't love your wife? Are you completely certain that you don't think her beautiful? It would be so simple if you did, you know."

"Please, *please,* Martin!" pleaded Trudie. "You can *try.*"

"Yes, do!" urged the Professor. "Think hard, and maybe it'll come to you!"

Martin turned to them despondently. "I shall try," he declared. "But I do not think that it will do much good. If Trudie only looked like Alois Pfaffenberger's wife—" Burying his face in his hands, he concentrated silently for some time. Then, "No, it is no use," he told them. "I like my Trudie very much, but I cannot say I love her. Also, it is not true that she is beautiful."

Trudie whimpered pitifully. Martin made a funny noise in his throat. The Professor muttered to himself, worried about his secretary's return, and said that it probably wouldn't have made any difference even if Martin had loved Trudie—he'd have forgotten her as soon as he saw Ulalah.

And suddenly a small, globular space-ship floated down soundlessly, and landed softly not twenty feet away.

"IT'S Ulalah!" exclaimed the Professor. "She's back!"

Martin, despite his anguish, found himself holding his breath, waiting for some super-duper combination of Ingrid Bergman, Mata Hari, and the Birth of Venus.

Trudie, despite her hopelessness and fear, felt a pang of poisonous jealousy.

Then the space-ship's door swung open, and they saw Ulalah standing there.

Martin's breath erupted all at once, in a hoarse croak. Trudie turned pale, and uttered a muted scream. The Professor sighed, and said, "Isn't she marvelous? If only I were twenty years younger . . . "

Then they simply sat there, staring at Ulalah, who—by every standard of Mirta-Morzula—was ravishing indeed. Her skin was fresh and fair. Her skin golden . . .

And she was big enough to make one Bertha Bummelzug, with one left over.

Besides, she bulged deliciously in all the wrong places.

Very deliberately, Martin removed his glasses. Very deliberately, he wiped them and put them on again, and said to the Professor, "Are—are they all like her in Mirta-Morzula?"

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"Oh, yes!" the Professor replied ecstatically.

"Thank you," said Martin. He looked at Ulalah. He looked at Trudie. He looked surprised. Then, rather hesitantly, as though he were under a great strain, he said, "I—I love you, Trudie." He paused. He grinned. "I love you," he repeated. "You are *beautiful!*"

The Professor cried out delightedly. Ulalah said, "Is something wrong?" in a puzzled voice. And Trudie . . .

Well, isn't it a matter of record that Martin Fledermaus couldn't tell a lie?

THE END

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(*continued on page* 76)

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THE TIN YOU LOVE TO TOUCH

By Robert Bloch

"BANISH HOUSEWORK CARES FOREVER" the ad promised and to Roscoe it was like the promise of Paradise. But when he answered the ad he didn't expect to receive a robot by return mail — he knew Agatha wouldn't stand for such a thing.

"GOOD morning, Madam," said the travelling salesman. "Are you the lady of the house?"

The slight figure in the apron and gingham dustcap moved forward in the doorway. "Kindly scram out of here," growled the voice from under the dustcap.

"But lady —"

"Don't you 'lady' me!" snarled the voice. "Now get out before I kick your sample-case for you!"

The salesman turned hastily away and the door slammed behind him.

Inside the bungalow, the figure in cap and apron sat down wearily on the chair nearest the door of the hallway.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" growled Roscoe Droop. "What in blazes can I do?"

Neither Heaven nor Hell gave him a reply as Mr. Droop flung his apron in the corner and tore the cap from his head. Without his domestic disguise, Roscoe Droop was revealed as a small, sallow-faced man with a slight body and gentle blue eyes.

Right now his eyes were clouded with rage and baffled indignation.

"What can I do?" he sighed, wearily. "That makes the third time this week some jerk salesman has mistaken me for a woman. What a spot to be in!"

He blushed and reached for a cigar. But he didn't light the stogie. Just in time he remembered—Agatha hated cigar smoke.

Agatha!

She was to blame for all his troubles. Agatha Droop. Sometimes Mr. Droop wondered why he had ever married her. Then he realized that he hadn't, really. *She* had married *him.*

Agatha was like that. Domineering. Six feet of solid muscle. Arms like steel cables. Just what they wanted down at the Hercules Steel Mill.

No wonder she'd found it easy to get a job as a welder! That had

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Illustration by Bill Terry

Mr. Droop wailed. "I was merely tinkering with the batteries . . ."

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started all the trouble — Agatha's welding job. Mr. Droop recalled the announcement perfectly.

"I'm going to be a welder," she had told him, one evening. "I'll make about seventy bucks a week, plus overtime."

"But honey," he protested.

These were the last words Mr. Droop ever uttered on the subject. Because Agatha started in.

"You'll have to quit your job, of course," she said. "Quit it at once. I can earn more money than you, so it's only common sense. You're too frail for factory work, and nobody wants a runt like you around anyway. So you can stay home and take it easy from now on.

"All you need to take care of is the housework, the gardening, firing the furnace, mowing the lawn, marketing, washing, cleaning, scrubbing, mopping, dusting and getting my meals."

Mr. Droop started to open his mouth again to say, "But honey" and then he stopped. Because Agatha hit him over the head with a teapot.

And so Agatha went to work and Mr. Droop stayed home and took care of the house.

It was humiliating. It was infuriating. It couldn't go on. Mr. Droop would have gone mad if it weren't for his hobby.

His hobby had always managed to save him, somehow. When he got married, Roscoe Droop was an enthusiastic putterer. He loved to mess around with tools and woodcarving jobs, and he had a home workshop in his basement. That is, he had it for about a month—and then Agatha made him give it up.

Now, in moments of strain, Mr Droop had nothing to turn to but his hobby magazine.

Like many an enthusiastic amateur, Mr. Droop was an avid reader of a magazine called UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. Its pages were crowded with monthly hints on how to build a yacht in your basement, how to run a model pig-pen in our garage and other such fascinating topics.

Not that it did Mr. Droop any good. Right now he could have used a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner more than anything else. But he had no money to buy such household aids.

Roscoe Droop simply wasn't the domestic type. He hated his washing and dusting and cooking. And these episodes with salesmen humiliated him. In times like these he turned to the consoling pages of UNPOPULAR SCIENCE.

It was with black despair (and his hands) that he now picked up the latest issue and riffled through the pages of the magazine.

He read the ads.

"YOU TOO CAN TURN YOUR ATTIC INTO A MODEL AQUARIUM."

"BUILD A SUBWAY IN YOUR BASEMENT."

It was no use. Roscoe Droop would never build an aquarium or a subway. He riffled through the classified advertisements and thought of

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his housekeeping tasks to come.

Housekeeping ——

The little square ad in the fine print fairly leaped out at him.

"BANISH HOUSEWORK CARES FOREVER," the headline proclaimed. "Startling new discovery eliminates all household duties!"

It sounded like a blurb for a new brand of soap chips to Mr. Droop. But he read on.

"Prominent scientist has perfected the ideal women's home companion," the ad stated. "Working models now in experimental stage. A limited number available for immediate trial. These models will not be sold—merely loaned out for six months' free trial to responsible parties. If you desire to take advantage of this offer, kindly submit complete character references in first letter. Write Dr. PEDRO MOKE, B.S.: S. O. L. BOX 13, UNPOPULAR SCIENCE."

Mr. Droop sat up. Maybe this might prove to be a solution to his unpleasant domestic difficulties. This invention, whatever it was, could relieve him of his work.

But Agatha would object, of course—

"Roscoe!"

The soft voice, gentle as the cry of a bull walrus, smote Mr. Droop's ear. A moment later the same ear was smote by a brawny fist.

"What are you loafing around for, you lazy bum?" growled a voice.

Mr. Droop looked up—way up—at Agatha.

Agatha Droop stood six feet tall in her Safety-Toe work shoes. The slacks covering her massive frame would have made an excellent pup-tent for a large troop of Boy Scouts.

She was not exactly a sight for sore eyes, although she was able to hand out sore eyes to those who didn't jump fast enough to suit her.

"What gives?" Agatha bellowed, flinging her lunch pail to the floor. "Isn't my dinner ready yet?"

"Just a minute, darling," sighed Mr. Droop.

"Well, hurry it up," his wife grumbled. "Here I work hard at the shop all day and you sit around the house taking things easy. I'm a working woman and I want my food."

Mr. Droop went into action. He brought Agatha the evening paper and her house slippers, and then finished up preparing the dinner in the kitchen.

Agatha snorted and grumbled her way to the table. She sat down and helped herself to the meat, the potatoes, the asparagus, the peas, the salad, the coffee, the pie.

Mr. Droop waited for comments. He'd worked hard at this meal.

One bite was enough.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" demanded Agatha, chewing her steak.

"Why, at the butcher's, darling."

"At the shoe-maker's, you mean! It's as tough as leather!"

"But —"

Agatha swung and Mr. Droop ducked. Gravy splattered the top of his head as the meat sailed across the room.

"One more mistake like that and

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I'll fix you," growled Agatha, stalking from the table.

Mr. Droop crept away. In the hall he noticed his discarded copy of UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. His lips tightened in a grim smile.

"All right," he murmured. "We'll see."

It was only a matter of minutes before he had written his letter to Dr. Pedro Moke — Inventor. He mailed it that same evening.

He didn't know what to expect, but he had a naive hope that his troubles would soon be over. That night he slumbered in bed quite peacefully.

On Mr. Droop's face was the gentle, trusting look of a little child—and the black eye that Agatha gave him just before they went to sleep.

IT WAS nearly a week later that the expressman arrived with the package. Mr. Droop had almost forgotten about his letter by this time.

But the doorbell rang and he answered it, and one of the expressmen tipped his cap and said, "Pardon me, Madam —"

Mr. Droop almost slammed the door in his face when he noticed the big package the men had carried up the stairs. It was a heavy wooden crate, and bore his name and address on the side in bold black crayon lettering.

"That's for me!" he exclaimed. "Where do I sign?"

In his excitement he lighted a cigar, and the expressmen scratched their heads as the "housewife" puffed on a fat stogie while signing the receipt.

Then they went down the steps and drove away, and Mr. Droop approached the bulky crate and tried to lift it.

Too heavy. It wouldn't budge.

Mr. Droop bent down to try again, wondering if he ought to answer a truss advertisement in UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. He strained and swore. The crate remained immovable.

"Now what the hell do I do?" he groaned.

"Why not open me up here?" said a voice.

"Fine idea—*what's that?*" snapped the startled man.

"Unwrap me here, silly," the voice advised.

"Where are you?" asked Mr. Droop, whirling around.

"Inside the crate, of course. Hurry up—it's no picnic being cooped up this way."

"It's no picnic listening to strange voices from packing-crates, either," observed Mr. Droop, a little bitterly. Still, he scurried away for a hammer and chisel.

When he returned, he approached the task of removing nails a little hesitantly. He was somewhat afraid of what might be inside the crate. These screwball inventors, now——

"What are you waiting for?" complained the shrill voice.

"Why — it's just that — who are you, anyway?" he demanded suddenly.

"I don't know."

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"You don't know?"

"Of course not, silly."

"Where did you come from, then?"

"From Dr. Moke, naturally. He made me."

"Then who are you?"

"I'm not a who, I'm a what," said the voice.

"Animal, vegetable or mineral?" inquired Mr. Droop.

"Neither."

"But —"

"Oh, open the crate, Mister! I won't bite you."

This wasn't much of a promise, but Mr. Droop was beginning to worry lest neighbors observe him carrying on a conversation with a packing-crate. Those old hens were gossipy enough, anyway.

With a deep sigh, Mr. Droop set to work. He pried away the boards and got tangled up in a bale of excelsior beneath. Then he began to remove a number of packages, wrapped in brown paper. Some were big, some small, some were long and some short. He set them down carefully on the porch.

He stooped again and his hands encountered — the bottom of the crate!

Where was the person who had spoken to him?

Outside of the small packages, the crate was empty!

"Hey!" said Mr. Droop. "What's happened to you?"

"I'm right here," said the voice, patiently. "Here, at your feet."

Mr. Droop jumped to one side. A large round brown-paper parcel rested before him.

"Come on, unwrap me," coaxed the voice.

His trembling fingers had quite a time, but Mr. Droop did the job. Then he stared down at the heavy, shining object in his hands.

It was a head—a metal head!

At least, it resembled a head. There was a sharp steel chin, a jutting aluminum nose, two eyesockets and a mouth set on a hinged jaw. The top of the silver skull was smooth and gleaming, but the base was corrugated, and a pipe extended under the chin.

"Hello," said the metal face. "Who are you?"

"God only knows," gasped Mr. Droop wildly. "I'm a guy that never expected to be talking to a steel head."

"I know," said the gleaming face. "You're Mr. Droop, the man I've come to work for."

"I guess so," Mr. Droop sighed. He watched in morbid fascination as the steel hinge slipped up and down on the jaw.

"How do you talk?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you," answered the head. "But come on, quit stalling. Put me together, will you please?"

"Put you together?"

"Of course. Assemble me. You'll find the rest of my parts in the other packages."

"What kind of crazy talk is this?" he wondered wildly.

"Are you by any chance accusing me of not being all there?" snapped the head, coldly. "If so, you're mis-

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taken. Dr. Moke personally dismembered me and packed me up. He would have sent you complete instructions for putting me together again, but there was no need. I can give you the directions personally. Come on, get busy. It's really very simple, you know. A three-year old child could do it."

Mr. Droop turned hastily away.

"Where are you going?" asked the head.

"To find you a three-year-old child. Let him do it. I don't want to."

The head burst into metallic laughter. "Come on, now. Just put me together. You'll find nuts and bolts in that small parcel, next to my arms and legs. And oh yes—that looks like my torso over there."

Cautiously, Mr. Droop set about his unusual task. Aided by the expert direction of the metal head, he began to assemble what soon proved to be a complete metal body. Two arms and two legs — beautifully hinged and articulated in the smallest detail—were easily attached to a shapely torso. Small openings in the metal sides were provided for the reception of a number of loose wire ends which made automatic connections somewhere inside the steel frame.

Little aluminum pins were set in place, and the head lowered onto an opening at the top of the torso. A telescoping connection evidently served as a neck.

Finally, Mr. Droop affixed wonderfully designed hands and feet to the ends of the metal limbs. The fingers and toes were quite the most remarkable features of the entire body.

"There," said the head, with some satisfaction. "At last! Hope all my wires are in place. You men are so clumsy." A surprising giggle came from the hinged jaws. "You lack the feminine touch."

"*Feminine* touch? Are you — female?"

"Of course, silly," tittered the head. "Aren't house servants supposed to be female?"

"Then what's your name?"

"I have none. That's up to you, Mr. Droop. Now—would you mind helping me up?"

Mr. Droop gingerly assisted the metal creature to its—or *her*—feet. Surprisingly enough, the five-foot body stood there in a perfect simulacrum of humanity.

Just like the Tin Woodman of Oz, Mr. Droop thought, wildly. Abruptly, he opened his mouth.

"That's it," he exclaimed. "I'll call you Tinnie."

"Tinnie? That's very nice—if not strictly accurate," said the metal creature. "After all, Dr. Moke might not like it if you inferred his robots were made out of tin."

"You're a robot," said Mr. Droop. "A real, sure-enough robot."

"Of course I am," said Tinnie.

"And you can talk and walk and think and—everything?"

"Not quite 'everything,' I'm afraid," Tinnie giggled. "You needn't worry about feeding me or a place to sleep. A little oiling now and then, and a little attention to

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my wiring is all I need."

Tinnie walked across the porch and Mr. Droop followed her metallic movements with astounded eyes. Aside from a slight clattering and swaying, the robot moved with remarkable precision. Whatever the miracle behind sight, hearing, thought, and mechanical coordination —the robot was real. And definitely a perfect working model.

As he watched, Tinnie bent down and scooped up brown paper and boards.

"Better clear this up right away," said the robot.

"Wait—I'll help you," said Mr. Droop, out of habit.

"Never mind," the robot told him. "This is my job. That's what Dr. Moke told me before I was packed. I came here to do the housework. So if you'll just show me around and tell me what you want done . . . "

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Mr. Droop followed Tinnie into the house.

It all sounded too good to be true. In his elation, he could have hugged the metal mademoiselle, kissed her squarely upon the hinges of her shiny silver jaw. But Mr. Droop was a highly moral man.

He compromised by giving Tinnie the house apron and dust-cap to wear.

The robot stood before the mirror, adjusting the garments.

"How lovely," Tinnie sighed. "You're so thoughtful, Mr. Droop. I know I'll enjoy working here for you. Is there anything you want before I go out and prepare supper?"

Mr. Droop paused, then grinned.

"Why yes," he said. "Yes, there is. Would you mind running into the bedroom and bringing me out a cigar?"

THE next few days were perfect —almost too perfect.

Mr. Droop made up his mind on one point, right away. Agatha must never know. Long before she arrived home that first evening, Mr. Droop had carefully instructed Tinnie on her expected chores and warned her to keep out of sight when Mrs. Droop was around.

He offered no explanation, and was thankful when the robot demanded none.

"Lie down under the bed," he suggested. "Stay there all night. Agatha goes to work at seven. Then you can get up."

Tinnie obeyed. The next day Mr. Droop showed her around and told her what was necessary for her to know about running the house.

It was sheer delight to watch Tinnie work. She never tired, never questioned, never complained. She swept, mopped, dusted. She washed and cleaned. And she cooked beautifully.

Dr. Moke had wrought wonders, all right. Mr. Droop could ask for nothing more. Tinnie stayed out of sight whenever the doorbell rang.

Agatha was more than pleased at the way the household was run. She asked no questions, but she grunted her surprise at Mr. Droop when she

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inspected the carefully dusted parlor and ate the well-cooked meals.

Mr. Droop had never been so happy before in his life—his married life, that is.

He couldn't help but tell Tinnie as much.

One afternoon, as the robot was sweeping the carpets and Mr. Droop stretched out on the sofa reading UNPOPULAR SCIENCE and puffing on a cigar, he suddenly shook his head.

"Is something wrong?" asked Tinnie, cocking her metallic head.

"Not at all," said Mr. Droop. "Quite the contrary. I was just marvelling at your efficiency. You're really quite wonderful, you know."

"Thank you," said the robot. "Dr. Moke would be pleased to hear that, I'm sure."

"What kind of a man is Dr. Moke?" asked Mr. Droop.

"He's a very famous scientist," Tinnie told him. "He's been working on his robot models for many years."

"He ought to be proud of creating you," Mr. Droop declared. "But I don't quite understand just how he managed to do it."

"Would you like to hear how I was made?" inquired Tinnie.

"Well—" said Mr. Droop. For no reason at all, he blushed a little.

"What's the matter?" Tinnie asked. "Didn't you ever hear about how to make a girl?"

"Uh—not exactly," admitted Mr. Droop, turning redder by the moment.

"It was an awful problem," the robot sighed. "To begin with there were the radio-frequencies to establish. How that man sweated over my wiring! Then he devised the artificial larnyx, the balance and coordination centers, and my chromium receptors. Even designing a steel and aluminum body was a problem. I'll never forget how he hid me in the basement during the scrap drive!"

Tinnie sighed reminiscently, and her toes rattled.

"Well, he did a swell job," Mr. Droop declared. "You look perfect."

"You really think so?" Tinnie giggled coyly. "Sometimes I think so myself." She swayed closer. "Have you noticed my chassis?" she murmured.

"Indeed I have," said Mr. Droop. "You have a lovely chassis, my dear."

Tinnie tittered.

"I mean it," said Mr. Droop. "I like you, Tinnie. I like everything about you. You're quiet and sensible and hardworking. You never nag or bully. I like your shining face and your—

"Awk!" said Tinnie.

"Whassat?" yelped Mr. Droop.

"Awk."

Tinnie suddenly stood rigid. Her metal arms dropped to her side and her head hung forward.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Droop asked, springing to his feet.

"I don't know." Tinnie's jaw moved laboriously on its hinges. "Your flattery got me so upset—I think maybe I've blown a fuse."

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"Great heavens!" Droop exclaimed. "Maybe I'd better send for a doctor."

"A garage mechanic would be better," squeaked the robot. "No—don't. I know now. One of the wires in my neck is loose. I can feel it dangling. You'll have to slip it back into my batteries, that's all. Just reach in and set the loose end back where it belongs."

Mr. Droop approached the robot and found the dangling wire. He bent down, put his arms around Tinnie's neck and held her back as his hands fumbled with the loose connection.

"Roscoe!"

Mr. Droop whirled suddenly.

Agatha stood in the doorway. Her blazing eyes consumed the scene before her.

"Roscoe—what are you up to?" rasped Mrs. Droop. "What is this—this animated garbage can?"

"It's a robot," Mr. Droop whispered. "Her name is Tinnie."

"*Her* name?" Agatha bristled. "A woman, eh?"

"No, you don't understand," Mr. Droop protested. "She's only a house-maid. She's been helping me out around the house . . . "

"So I see."

Agatha stared bleakly at Mr. Droop's pose. He still held Tinnie in his arms, and his left hand was poised at her neck in what appeared to be an impassioned caress.

"But you don't see!" wailed Mr. Droop. "I wasn't doing anything, Agatha—I swear it! I was merely tinkering with her batteries —"

"Tinkering with her batteries?" Agatha was shocked.

"I mean, she asked me to examine her chassis —"

Mr. Droop waved his arms pitifully. "I can't explain," he sighed. "But it's all right. She's harmless. Not like you and I. No mother or father —"

"Go on," snapped Agatha. "Go on. Tell me how you took advantage of this poor orphan while I was away. I ought to tear you limb from limb."

"Please don't make a mess," piped Tinnie. "I've just cleaned the carpet."

"You see?" exclaimed Mr. Droop, triumphantly. "She's a robot. A scientist sent her here to do the housework. She's a perfect servant."

"Humph!" remarked his wife. Then she shrugged. "We'll look into all this later," she promised. "I'd tend to this little affair now, but there's something more important on my mind."

"What is it?" asked Mr. Droop.

"I'm bringing the boss home for dinner tomorrow night," Agatha announced.

"The boss?"

"Yes sir," Agatha declared, triumphantly. "If I make a real impression I can go places at the Hercules Steel Mill. My dinner guest is none other than George Musclebinder himself."

"The Steel King?" said Mr. Droop, impressed in spite of himself.

"Nobody else but. Tomorrow

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night you'll prepare dinner for one of the biggest steel men in the country and I want you to remember that. You and your Tin Lizzie kitchen maid had better turn out a good meal, or else."

"We'll do it," Mr. Droop promised.

"Of course we will," said the robot.

Mrs. Droop glared at Tinnie malevolently.

"None of your tricks now," she muttered. "I'm going to let you stay until tomorrow and help out. But after that —"

"You aren't going to send her away, are you?" whispered Mr. Droop.

Agatha nodded.

"Certainly am," she told him. "After tomorrow night, she goes out of here on her tin can!"

MR. Droop had a miserable time of it that night and throughout the following day. He himself tended to the dusting and cleaning while Tinnie busied herself in the kitchen, preparing the meal for Agatha and her special guest.

"You'll have to serve," she told him. "Your wife won't let her boss see me. I don't think Agatha likes me very well."

"She'll get over it," Mr. Droop assured her, none too convincingly. "Agatha is like that. Just fix a good meal, now, and I'm sure she'll forgive you and let you stay."

"You want me to stay?" said Tinnie. A melting gleam appeared in the reflected corners of her eyesockets.

"More than anything in the world," said Mr. Droop. "It's been just heavenly having you here—for the first time I know what peace and comfort means."

Tinnie giggled. Mr. Droop stared at her. For the first time he noticed that her jaw-hinges made dimples in her cheeks. A most becoming phenomenon.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "We'd better hurry. They should be arriving any minute now."

Mr. Droop set the table and Tinnie retreated to the kitchen. He could hear her fussing with pots and pans on the stove.

Then the doorbell rang and Agatha entered.

George Musclebinder followed her into the hallway.

The Steel King was as rugged as his nickname implied. He was as tall and muscular as Agatha herself, and his bulldog features lent him an air of formidable pugnacity. At the moment, however, he was chuckling playfully and slapping Agatha on the back.

Agatha, coy and red-faced, snorted merrily and lighted his cigar for him.

Mr. Droop stood in the doorway amazed. Agatha acting playful! Agatha permitting someone to smoke in her house!

"Hello there," she called to him. "George and I are a little late, I guess. We stopped in for a couple boilermakers on the way home."

"Shot and a beer," Musclebinder

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explained. "Puts hair on your chest, eh, Aggie?"

Mr. Droop fully expected his wife to strike the Steel King dead. The idea of anyone calling her "Aggie" was unthinkable.

But Agatha did nothing of the sort. Instead she giggled, gave Musclebinder a dig in the ribs, and then sneered at Mr. Droop.

"What are you goggling at?" she demanded. "Take George's hat for him and get ready to serve dinner. We're starving."

Mr. Droop reached for Musclebinder's hat. The big man surveyed him with a chuckle.

"So this is your better half, eh, Aggie?" he said. "Well well well. Pleased to meet you—Droop."

He suddenly seized Mr. Droop's hand and began to grind it to a pulp. Mr. Droop's arm became totally numb up to the shoulder.

Musclebinder, evidently making up his mind whether or not to remove the arm from its socket, suddenly decided against it and dropped Mr. Droop's hand again.

"Let's see what you've cooked up for us working folks," he roared, with hideous heartiness. "Aggie tells me you're quite a good cook. Guess that's why she married you, huh?"

Mr. Droop would gladly have killed the man on the spot. Instead, a withering glance from Agatha sent him off to the closet with Musclebinder's hat. Then he stood aside as his wife and the Steel King made for the dining room.

They sat down. Agatha stared at the neatly-decorated table.

"What's the idea of three places?" she demanded.

"Well, there's Musclebinder, and you, and myself —"

"There's George and I," she corrected. "You can eat in the kitchen after we've finished. Hurry up now, start serving."

She turned to Musclebinder with a cloying smile. "Don't mind him—he's such a dope," she declared.

Mr. Droop stumbled out into the kitchen. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" asked Tinnie, solicitously, as she covered the *entree* with a silver lid.

"Nothing, nothing at all," lied Mr. Droop desperately. He knew how hard Tinnie had worked preparing this meal and he hadn't the heart to spoil things for her now.

"Everything will be all right," he lied. "I'm going to eat out here with you and keep you company."

The robot flashed him a look of gratitude not unmixed with maternal anxiety.

"I do hope her boss likes what I've prepared for him," she said. "Here's Agatha's plate. But this dish is specially for him."

"Swell," said Mr. Droop.

He took soup into the dining room. Agatha and Musclebinder were laughing uproariously. At the sight of Mr. Droop, his wife's jaw set.

"What's this?" she demanded.

"Why—soup."

"That's not what I mean, stupid! What's the idea of serving food without being properly dressed? Go

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back in the kitchen and put on your apron."

"Haw haw!" laughed Musclebinder. "That's a hot one! Got him trained, haven't you?"

"You can bet who wears the slacks around this family!" Agatha boasted. "He toes the line, just like the men do down at the shop."

"That's right," Musclebinder declared. "In all my years as a steel man I've never seen anyone who could handle men the way you could. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Aggie. How'd you like to be promoted to foreman?"

Mr. Droop didn't hear her answer. He humbly cleared away the soup plates, and returned from the kitchen with the main dishes.

Agatha's plate contained meat and potatoes.

Musclebinder received a bare platter and the silver-lidded entree dish.

"Something special for you," Mr. Droop told him.

"Swell! Say, I'll bet you're the sweetest little housekeeper," snickered Musclebinder, roguishly pinching Mr. Droop's cheek.

He swept the lid off the platter and helped himself liberally to the gravy-covered contents.

"Gawd, I'm starved," he bellowed. "I'm gonna eat and eat and——

He speared a forkful from the mass on his plate and gulped eagerly.

Suddenly his eyes goggled.

"Gazawp!" he spluttered. "Oookle. Mfffuggg! Ulp!"

"What's the matter?" Agatha murmured.

"Urgle! Pluppff! Aaaargh!" groaned Musclebinder. His face turned a deep purple and he began to choke and cough.

"George—what in the name of—"

"Yeeeeoooowww!!!"

With a gasping shriek, Musclebinder managed to expectorate the obstruction in his throat.

Objects fell with a hideous clank on his plate.

Wide-eyed, Mr. Droop stared at what lay there. A gravy-covered collection of nuts, bolts, and pieces of sheet metal!

"What the hell?" croaked Musclebinder.

"Come here—*you!*" yapped Agatha.

Mr. Droop made a dash for the kitchen door. Agatha pounded at his heels.

"Who did it?" she screamed, bursting into the kitchen to confront her husband and the robot.

"Did what?" asked Tinnie, calmly.

"Who served my boss that dish of hardware?"

"Why I did, of course," Tinnie told her. "What's the matter, did you want some too? I hardly thought I should give nuts to you."

"Nuts to who?" yelled Agatha. "Quit insulting me! What I want to know is—why serve George Musclebinder a plate of metal?"

"Isn't that what he likes to eat?" asked Tinnie. "I thought you said he was a big steel man."

"Steel man?"

Agatha went berserk.

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She made a dive for the robot across the room. Half-way in her charge she scooped up the can-opener from the kitchen table. Brandishing the deadly weapon, she bore down on Tinnie with murderous intent.

"You metal-brained m o r o n," screamed Agatha. "I'll chop you up into tin cans!"

She slashed out with the can-opener as Tinnie retreated around the kitchen table.

Mr. Droop stood paralyzed for an instant. But only for an instant. Then something snapped inside him. He growled.

"Let her alone!" yelled Mr. Droop.

Agatha turned. "How dare you interfere, you worm?" she demanded.

"Let her alone!" commanded Mr. Droop. "Don't you dare harm the woman I love."

"Love?" Agatha gasped.

So did Mr. Droop. The words came unbidden to his lips—but when he spoke them, he realized he was telling the truth.

"You love this walking junk-heap?" rasped Agatha.

"Yes," said Mr. Droop, desperately. "And if you harm her, I'll —no you don't!"

Agatha turned and struck out at Tinnie.

As she did so, Mr. Droop went into action. Grabbing up a rolling pin, he brought it down firmly on Agatha's head. The rolling pin broke, but Agatha stopped.

At that moment, George Musclebinder lurched into the kitchen.

"What's all this?" roared the Steel King.

His eyes goggled as he saw Tinnie. The robot, seeking to escape, tottered toward him. Musclebinder saw the gleaming steel-body, the metallic face, the outstretched clawing arms advancing.

"A monster!" he gurgled. "Help —it's witchcraft—take it away!"

Shaking with sudden fright, Musclebinder dashed from the kitchen.

Agatha followed.

"Wait for me, George," she wailed. "I'm coming with you."

She paused in the doorway and sniffed at Mr. Droop.

"I suppose you know this is the end," she told him. "I'm leaving you for good. You've made a wreck out of poor George. And if you prefer the company of a walking garbage-can to me—well, it's your funeral!"

Mr. Droop made a gesture with his rolling-pin and Agatha closed the door hastily.

He stood there, listening to the sound of retreating footsteps.

Tinnie was at his side, her jaw-hinges moving in a slow smile.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saving me."

"Nothing at all," muttered Mr. Droop, in an embarrassed voice. "Forget it."

"I can't forget it," said Tinnie. The robot moved closer. Her voice was soft. "Did you mean what you told Agatha?" she asked.

"What?" gulped Mr. Droop.

"About — about the woman you love." Tinnie turned her face away

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shyly as she spoke.

"I—I guess I did," admitted Mr. Droop, slowly.

"Then I can stay here," said Tinnie. "And cook for you and keep house and everything."

Mr. Droop turned with new resolution. He held the robot close. "I'll say you can," he muttered. "I'll go out and get a job and feel like a man again. And you can run the household. Tinnie, I've always wanted a girl just like you."

And so it was arranged. Mr. Droop wrote to Dr. Moke and got permission. The two of them have settled down quite happily.

As to whether a union between a man and a robot can work out, only time can tell.

But at the moment both Tinnie and Mr. Droop are looking forward to the day they can celebrate their tin wedding anniversary.

THE END

PERSONALS

(*continued from page* 61)

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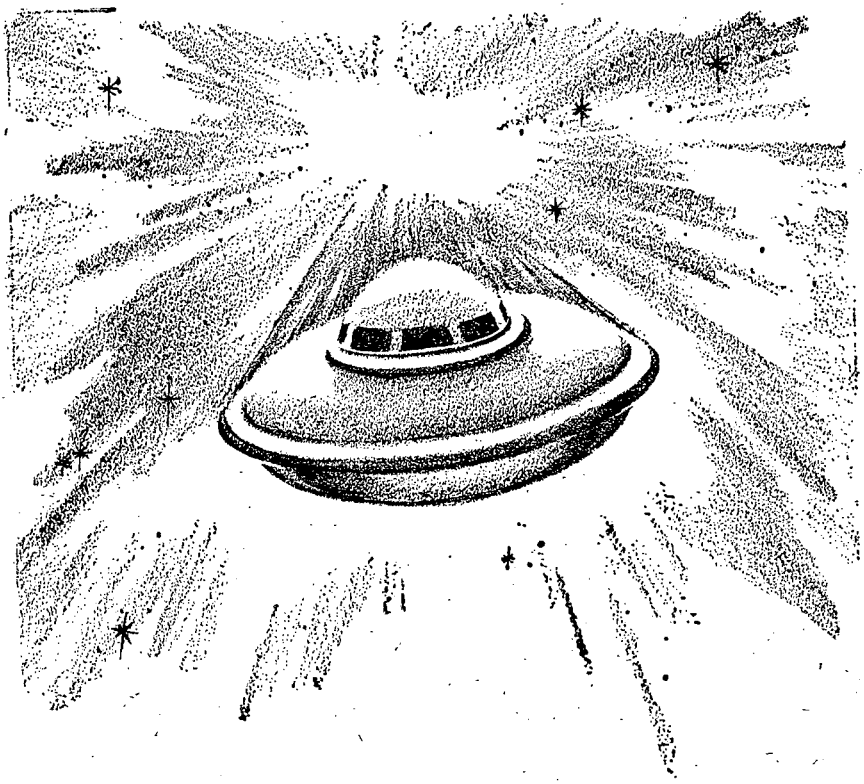

THE ship was silvery on one side and black on the other. It was shaped roughly like two dinner plates joined face to face, with a conning tower atop the black surface. Nobody on Earth saw it as it flashed into visibility just below the ultra-violet for an instant, covered twenty miles in something under one minute, then vanished once more.

Obviously it was a space ship—that tell-tale silvery and black opposite sides construction was a necessity in space travel. The silvery side reflected the sun's enormous heat; the black side absorbed it. The result was absolute control of interior temperature. In the utter emptiness of space, temperature control is of prime importance.

Just as obviously, the ship was more than a space ship. No space ship ever winked into the visible spectrum and then winked out again as this one did. This ship traveled in more than the plane of the known universe—it voyaged also the unknown, beyond sight, beyond hearing, beyond molecular

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MR. YELLOW JACKET

By Ray Palmer

Be careful what you think! It may rise out of your mind to haunt you! Thoughts might just as well be for the good!

matter.

Surely, then, the beings who piloted it must be more than human!

Once more the strange ship flashed into visibility, high in the upper atmosphere . . .

* * *

"They've got radio," said Auracles.

"Television too," said Samosen. "Crude, but quite effective."

Auracles grinned. "Crude is no word for it. They've not yet managed to eliminate the commercial!"

"Savages!" said Samosen in simulated disgust.

"I'll bet they're going to be good for a lot of fun during our census-take," said Auracles, an anticipatory gleam in his eye. "Judging from the chart for this era, they will be just on the verge of the ability to reason without emotion . . ."

"*Just* on the verge," commented Samosen. "I'd say that nearly every bit of their reasoning is dictated by their blood rather than by their pituitary. I'm afraid we'll find that emotion is the dictator here."

"Well, isn't that what we'd hoped when we took this job?" queried Auracles. "We wanted a colony which was graded pretty low so that we could take it easy for once. We've been up against some tough problems the last two thousand years; a simple job like this census will be a vacation for us."

"It will," agreed Samosen. "Unless we discover that a pruning job is in order."

"On this planet!" exclaimed Auracles. "Not very likely. Why, Man has lived here only some seventy-five thousand years, and he'd hardly be out of his diapers, and certainly no trouble!"

"I don't know about that," warned Samosen. "If you'll take a look at the radioactivity gauge, you'll see that they've got the stratosphere pretty well contaminated—and if you ask me, with both Uranium fission and Hydrogen fusion!"

Auracles leaped to the gauge and read it in astonishment. "So they have! Who'd have thought it!"

"Certainly not the Council," said

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Samosen grimly, "or they'd have sent more than a couple of census-takers!"

"You mean we're not going to have that vacation after all?"

"Has stopping an atom war ever been a picnic for us?" asked Samosen.

"No," muttered Auracles, "it hasn't . . ." He groaned. "Outsmarted ourselves again!" he said wryly. "Why didn't we take that nebula mapping job?"

"If you'll remember, Sophanes presented it in a very dark light," reminded Samosen.

Auracles smacked his fist into his palm. "*Deliberately* so. I *thought* he had a silly sort of grin on his face when he gave us our choice!"

"Silly?" said Samosen. "Not *he!* He's the smartest Co-ordinator in this System. It's we who have been silly—and I'll bet he's laughing yet."

Auracles groaned again. "Don't remind me! It's bad enough as it is. But we're here and we might as well go down and face the music . . ."

"*Listen!*" said Samosen, lifting his hand for silence.

"To what?"

"Speaking of music, listen to what's coming in over the mentaphone . . ."

Both men listened, and an expression of extreme interest and a tinge of awe spread over their features.

"How many years did you say this planet was inhabited by a human culture?" asked Samosen.

"Seventy-five thousand years."

"If you're right, now I *know* why Sophanes was grinning!"

"You mean . . . ?"

"I certainly do! I wondered when our Assistant Co-ordinator tests were going to come!"

"Oh *no!*" Auracles exclaimed. "Not *this* kind of a job for a test! We'll flunk out! I don't think I can co-ordinate a situation like this . . ."

Samosen grinned. "If you can't we'll be mapping nebulae for another thousand years."

Auracles glared at him. "You're a cheerful cuss. Okay, let's get on with it—start this pancake down where the atoms get rough!"

* * *

And indeed, the atoms *did* get rough. Surrounding the planet Earth, as all planets, are a series of belts of various densities and conditions. For instance, at the outer limits of the atmosphere, which is roughly some 180,000 miles away from the surface of the planet, is a line of demarcation which could hardly be said to be a physical thing, being more of a geographical location on the star charts of each planet as they are prepared by the geographers of the guardian race of space. The term atmosphere, at this distance from the planet, is possibly a misnomer, yet it has a specific density and several thousand atoms of hydro-

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gen, neon, oxygen and other elements per cubic foot of space and must therefore be called a part of the planet's atmosphere. Beyond this final and outer belt of the atmosphere there exists no such thing as gravity as conceived of by humans on the planet. Gravity is a property of matter and is not present where matter is not present in its atomic form.

Approaching the earth, other belts are encountered, each correspondingly greater in density, and containing different elements in different combinations. In some of these belts there exists a plethora of elements such as iron, silicon, copper, nickel, and a few of the heavier elements such as radium, uranium and thorium. In these belts occur the terrific storms that are called by Earth people "radio storms from the sun". Because the worst of these storms occur during periods of sunspots, this assumption is understandable. However, it is these storms which set in motion the whirlpools which act to condense a multitude of minor planets ranging in size from a grain of sand to masses hundreds of tons in weight. These are the objects called meteorites by Earth people. Falling from heights of 50,000 miles (more or less, since there are several of these belts) these minor planetoids attain a terrific velocity and burn up when they plunge into the heavier atmosphere at a height of 75 miles and down to the surface itself, which is actually reached by some of the heavier bodies. Meteorites do not come from outer space, which is absolutely empty of atomic matter of this type, but contains only the subatomic structures.

Plunging their ship down through these belts, Auracles and Samosen experienced many thrilling moments, especially when they had packed the subatomic framework of their ship with atomic structures and prepared it for flight in the lower regions. Even their own bodies were loaded down with low-order substance and for a short while they groaned under the unaccustomed massiveness. But their matter shields held, and although the ship was buffeted and pummelled by bits of rock and iron and nickel, none penetrated, and they were uninjured, although thoroughly shaken up.

The ship became sluggish as it entered the extreme density of the last 50 miles and their top speed became a mere 2600 miles per hour. They forced it forward and downward until it neared the point on the planet's surface where originated the mysterious music they had detected in the mentascope . . .

PEOPLE who were acquainted with Ken Johnson termed him lazy. What he was doing at the moment would have seemed to justify this definition of his general attitdue toward life. At a time

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when ordinary men were at their jobs, Ken Johnson was lying flat on his back at the top of a hill overlooking a tiny lake. He wasn't even chewing on a straw, or tossing leaves to the wind; he was just lying there, as relaxed as a broken doll.

But to people who knew Ken Johnson well, there would have been a reluctance to accuse him of sloth; for he had often proved to them that he was achieving most when seeming to be doing nothing. Ken was an engineer. He built, specifically, bridges. He liked to build bridges. He said they were like musical instruments, and that every well-built bridge had its particular musical composition built into its cables and girders. If there was an off-key note in that composition, the bridge would eventually collapse. To demonstrate his theory, he had once built a bridge for the sole purpose of sending it crashing by playing a single note incessantly on a violin. It hadn't crashed, but Ken had dynamited it and rebuilt it; for safety's sake, as he put it.

Right now, however, Ken Johnson wasn't building bridges. He wasn't even thinking of bridges. He was listening. To music. Music that didn't exist, except in his own imagination. Anyone else, lying beside him, would have heard nothing. Yet, in Ken Johnson's ears thundered the chords and strains of a gigantic symphony, so vast that it performed in empty space, far beyond the earth.

Ken's eyes were open, staring up into the blue abyss that the sky becomes when you stare up at it, excluding all else from your vision. He peered into the void wherein played the millions of pieces of the orchestra of his mind. He saw no musicians, but he saw color, form, motion . . . They harmonized with the music, and were as real to his vision as the music to his ears. Had someone spoken, he would not have heard. The rumble of gigantic kettle drums and the thrumming of thousands of bass viols would have drowned out even the shouting of a mob. The blare of glinting brass, and the singing of millions of vibrating strings would have stilled a tornado's roar. The clear notes of woodwinds and the clash of cymbals would have cancelled out the crash of gunfire.

And yet, through all the magnificence of the symphony of the void that was roaring in his ears, that one, single dissident note, that off-key harmonic, intruded. Across his vision soared a tiny yellow speck, and in his ears sounded an angry buzzing. Almost instantly the symphony crashed in ruined tones about his mental ears, and his gaze centered on the tiny intruder.

All that was left now was the buzzing of the hornet, and sounding by itself, it did not seem inharmonious. A moment of pique was replaced by a gleam of interest in

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Ken's eyes, and once more new notes began to sound in the emptiness, this time keyed to the resonance of the soaring hornet.

Ken Johnson was improvising. He was composing a symphonic tone poem around the buzzing note of the hornet that had so rudely shattered his enjoyment of the cosmic masterpiece to which he had been listening so attentively.

And while music soared in his mind, so also soared a growing, developing, evolutionizing hornet, a hornet named "Mr. Yellow Jacket." Ken Johnson was delighted with his mental fantasy. In his imagination, he gave the hornet—now removed to cosmic space, its tiny progenitor long since gone from actual vision—human attributes. Instead of forelegs, it developed tiny hands; on its head it wore a tiny peaked cap, cocky, jaunty, debonair; its head became a human head with a long, pointed probing nose, and an acquiline and satanish look. Bald-headed it was, with pointed red ears, and two sets of gossamer wings. As for its posterior, it remained in every respect a hornet, complete with rapier-like sting, yellow, banded with red.

And there in the cosmic vastness of the mind, Mr. Yellow Jacket performed, a Mephistopheles of the insect world. Idly Ken gave it other human characteristics, not of the visible kind: greed, anger, desire, the urge for power, envy, hate, deceit, lust, sly resourcefulness . . .

Ken frowned, and the music in his mind took on an inharmonious tone. How could he weave a better strand of characteristics into such a creature as a hornet? Certainly a hornet cannot love—except perhaps its own kind? What did the biologists say about that? Was the mating of hornets of the essence of love? Was the insect world replete only with the preservation instinct, or was there the human element? Mr. Yellow Jacket was partially human—and yet, Ken could not imagine love into its rapier-quick body.

Gradually the music faded, and the imaginary form of Mr. Yellow Jacket disappeared from his mind's eye as the thought of the word love brought another subject to his mind. The other subject was a girl named Mary. Mary Chase. And at the thought of her name, he grinned, and all memory of Mr. Yellow Jacket vanished. She had led him a merry chase, all right; she was still doing it! She'd said she'd meet him here, today, and she hadn't come. He'd waited so long that his boredom had forced his mind into the musical day-dreaming in which he had been indulging. Now, instead, he pictured Mary in his thoughts . . . Wholesome that's what she was. One hundred eighteen pounds of full-bodied perfection. She had auburn hair, glowing golden-tan skin, blue eyes and full red lips that beckoned inviting-

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ly, yet always seemed to evade him skillfully. Wholesome temptation—and she knew how to tease . . .

He grinned, got slowly to his feet, and began to walk down the hill.

* * *

"JUST look at the way that thing is staring at his mental image of the girl," commented Samosen.

Auracles shuddered. "If he only knew what he'd created!"

The two cosmic census-takers stood beside their invisible ship on the hilltop and breathed the heavy air of the planet deeply. Their bodies, had they been visible to Ken Johnson, would have reminded him of statues of ancient Greek gods. However, they lacked the classical appearance of the Greek statuary, being rather more everyday in appearance, more modern, more supple and easy-limbed. Had either one appeared on the beach at Coney Island in the guise of a lifeguard, he would have attracted little attention as an alien type, but he would have been mobbed by the female representatives of Earth's population. Stripped to the waist, they wore only silvery kirtles and softly tanned leathery sandals. Their hair was clipped short and their faces smooth.

"That gives us *two* problems," Samosen predicted.

Auracles, safe in his invisibility, considered the gimlet eyes of Mr. Yellow Jacket. "Yes," he agreed. "There is a situation developing here that can lead to madness for those two wonderful examples of human development. We can't permit that—this planet has too few of their type, and we'll need many if we are to save the entire culture from ruin in the next fifty years."

"You're being optimistic," said Samosen. "I don't think this will be any *quick* job. Might take us two hundred years!"

"Two hundred!" Auracles looked startled, then he gazed about him, his strangely penetrative vision broadening to take in the far horizons and beyond. "Yes," he admitted, "I think you're right. There are numerous danger spots. That small peninsula jutting into what they call the Sea of Japan, for instance . . . "

"I see it," said Samosen. "And observe the oil region called Iran!"

Auracles jumped a little. "Ouch!" he said. "We've got a real hot spot there!"

"What would you say the population was?" queried Samosen reflectively.

"Of Iran?"

"No. Of the whole planet."

"Perhaps two billion, two hundred million."

Samosen smiled. "Your experience is beginning to tell," he complimented. "I'd say you've hit it on the head with first glance."

"And what *grade*," shot back Auracles, "do you think the entire population would be?"

"Five."

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Auracles looked resigned. "I'd hoped I was wrong about that. We'll be here at *least* two hundred years."

Samosen glanced about him, ignoring the sinister Mr. Yellow Jacket glaring malevolently down the path at the retreating back of Ken Johnson—except to note that the half-human image seemed to be taking on a more substantial appearance as it breathed more and more of the atmospheric elements.

"Observe," he said suddenly, "the weather!"

Auracles observed. "Rather nice," he said. "I'd say the people of this particular region are blessed with the best weather they've seen in several thousand years."

"They call this area Wisconsin," said Samosen. "And you're right about the weather being exceptionally good. About eleven thousand years ago this area was glacial, and about four thousand years ago it was about like it is now—ideal. Not since then has it been as good."

Auracles looked at Samosen curiously. "What's your idea behind all this discussion of the weather?" he asked. "I know you aren't given to idle conversation, even if this is a universal topic."

"They have a saying here 'there's a lot of talk about weather, but nothing is *done* about it' . . . . "

Auracles eyes widened. "You mean *do* something about it?"

"Might cut down the period to one hundred years," said Samosen laconically.

Auracles slapped a fist into a palm. "You're right! It's a well-known fact that wars are fought in good weather!"

Samosen grunted. "Sometimes."

"What do you mean, sometimes?"

"Let's wait and see," said Samosen enigmatically. "Meanwhile, let's take readings on this other situation. I'd say we've got to do something to prevent what's going to happen. Just take a look at Mr. Yellow Jacket!"

Auracles looked at the materializing mental phantasm. "He's getting awfully easy to see," he admitted. "That boy, Johnson, is quite a creative fellow."

"That he is," agreed Samosen. "And his music is terrific. I wouldn't be surprised if they heard that back at Co-ordination."

"I hope they recorded it," wished Auracles. "I'd like a copy for my collection."

* * *

MARY Chase puckered up her lips invitingly and Ken Johnson kissed them soundly.

"There," she said. "Do you think I'd be so co-operative now if I was actually mean enough to stand you up on the hill this afternoon? Honest, Kenny, I just couldn't get away from the boss. He insisted that I get out every one of those letters, even if it did take all Saturday afternoon. And the switchboard is closed on Saturdays, so I couldn't even call you

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to prevent you from going out there so futilely."

"It wasn't exactly futile," said Ken. "I got a needed rest, and I did some very nice day dreaming."

"About me?" asked Mary demurely.

"Of course not," he laughed. "Would you want me to go mad! No, I dreamed about symphonies—and hornets."

"Hornets! What a strange thing to day-dream about."

"He was a rather unusual fellow," said Ken reflectively. "He butted in on my symphonic reverie and spoiled it with his buzzing, so I thought I'd make him take its place. By the time he'd flown away, I'd replaced him in imagination with an ugly little fellow with a human head and a vicious leer on his face. In fact, he turned out to be such an evil fellow, that I dropped him right there. I pictured him leering at you, and with that stinger . . . "

Mary looked startled. "Ken Johnson, you're still mad at me for not being there!"

He didn't answer, just looked at her peculiarly.

Determinedly Mary wrapped her arms around him and kissed him time and again on the lips, the nose, his ears . . . Then she stepped back. "There," she said defiantly, "does that make it up to you?"

"It sure does!" he said enthusiastically. "I *thought* you'd fall for that hornet stuff. Especially when he started leering . . . "

"Why, you . . . !" Mary began indignantly, then suddenly she smiled. She advanced once more, fumbling with one hand at her throat, then she pressed her lips against his and wrapped her arms around him.

For an instant he relaxed in ecstacy, then he leaped with a hoarse cry of anguish and tore himself from her arms.

"Ouch!" he yelled, turning red to the roots of his hair and clasping both hands behind him.

Calmly Mary returned the red-jeweled ornament to her blouse, closing the clasping pin deliberately. "Some hornets can *sting* as well as leer," she said.

"They certainly can!" he gasped. "But couldn't you pick a more genteel place to sting?"

"Hornets aren't particular where they sting," said Mary complacently.

"Nor is Mary Chase," said Ken. "After that bit of familiarity, you'll just *have* to marry me."

"Ken Johnson," she said icily, "am I to infer that you are proposing to me again?"

"Well, if you want to look at it that way . . ."

"I do!" she snapped. "And for your information, the answer is . . ."

"Yeah," he groaned. "I know. The usual answer."

She looked at him with a strange softness. "This is where you *really* get stung, Ken," she said. "The answer is . . . yes."

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For an instant he looked stunned, then he leaped forward and swept her into his arms. Their lips met and held, but after a moment Mary struggled free and lifted her head questioningly toward the night sky.

"What was that?" she asked.

"What was what?"

"I thought I heard a buzzing noise—like a hornet," she said hesitantly, a frown on her features.

"A hornet?" he laughed, then with a worried look grabbed for the pin on her blouse. "Don't you try that again!" he said hastily. But she paid no attention, continuing to listen intently for a repetition of whatever she had heard. "Besides," he said with a queer look at her, "this is night, and hornets are all safely abed by now."

She looked at him, then relaxed and smiled. "And that's where I've got to go, if I want to get up in time for Church and our walk in the woods tomorrow."

* * *

"WE can't kill him," said Auracles. "It's against the rules."

Samosen bit his lip. "Seems there ought to be some way to get rid of him. After all, he isn't technically real."

"Don't kid yourself!" retorted Auracles. "When that Johnson creates something, it's *real*. Just as real as those bridges he builds."

"If he carries out his plan, I'll *break* the rules!" blurted Samosen. "Even if I spend the next ten thousand years sweeping out the Coal Sack."

"Don't mention the name of that nebula to me," groaned Auracles. "Here's our chance to pass our Assistant Co-ordinator tests, and we can't botch it with blood-thinking. That's one thing we've got to watch, in this heavy atmosphere—muddled reasoning."

"Well, what exactly is the situation?" demanded Samosen. "We've *got* to find a solution. As I see it, nothing is going to stop Mr. Yellow Jacket from carrying out his instincts and—well, it would kill Mary Chase in a very horrible manner!"

"The proper thing to do is to *protect* Mary. When your lamb is pursued by a lion, you flee with the lamb."

"Flee? Where to?"

"I mean it figuratively," said Auracles patiently. "In some way we must make it impossible for him to get to her."

"We could set up a force shield."

"No good. We can't let anybody know we're here. And a shield to keep that beast out would be detectable all over this globe. Remember, they're pretty well advanced in atomics."

"I'll say they are. And that's our *big* problem. We should, by rights, be working on that, rather than on this more sentimental thing. But I'll be hanged if I do."

"Wouldn't hurt you," grinned Auracles.

"What wouldn't?"

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"Being hanged!"

Samosen looked at Auracles. "Your jokes are very bad," he said. He leaped forward, spun Auracles around, and clasped one brawny arm around Auracles' throat and squeezed. "For instance, how's this for a proof that we *could* be hanged? Note how *necessary* it is for you to breathe in your present atomic state."

He released his hold, and Auracles reeled to a chair and sat down. He was gasping and choking. "Right," he said, finally. "I'm just not used to breathing. Our last job was not an atmospheric one, and I'd almost forgotten."

He got to his feet and walked over to the four-dimensional chart of the next twenty-four hours they had prepared. He placed a finger on a particular place and time. "This is where Mr. Yellow Jacket is now," he said. He moved a finger. "And here's where Mary Chase will be after she leaves Church tomorrow."

"Exactly where Mr. Yellow Jacket will intercept her, if present conditions continue," said Samosen.

"Yes. Thus, the answer lies in the conditions now existing and what we can do to change them."

"You mean?"

"Yes, I mean the weather. Since we intend to change the weather to influence the course of Man's next war, why not change it to influence the course of this particular event?"

"I see what you're driving at!" said Samosen excitedly. "No hornet, even with the attributes given to Mr. Yellow Jacket by Ken Johnson, can entirely ignore the cold. And certainly Mary Chase will also be induced to change her usual plan to walk through the woods to meet Ken after church. That will delay the event for some time, and give us a chance to plan something more effective."

"That's it. And if we're going to blow up a blizzard by tomorrow morning, we'll have to get busy right now!"

* * *

MR. Yellow Jacket knew he could see more than a man could see. He could even see more than a hornet can usually see. For instance, Saturday afternoon, on the hill above the little lake where he had suddenly become aware he existed, he had seen Mary Chase, although she was not actually there but only a figment of Ken Johnson's imagination. Also, he had seen two other beings who did not realize he could see them. And because Mr. Yellow Jacket had been endowed with an unusual amount of slyness and craft, he had not allowed them to realize his knowledge of their presence.

And now, as the cold penetrated into the hollow log into which he had crept for the night, he knew the reason for it. But raging in his insect-human head was a savage desire. He, Mr. Yellow Jacket, de-

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sired Mary Chase. And he, Mr. Yellow Jacket was insanely jealous of Ken Johnson, who had last night finally won Mary Chase's consent to be his.

Mr. Yellow Jacket could reason, but he did not know how he could reason. There was nothing about himself that Mr. Yellow Jacket questioned as to its reality, and its whyfor. He only accepted it as factual. He *wanted* Mary Chase, and he intended to have her. Both as a hornet and as a human.

Biologically, Mr. Yellow Jacket wasn't troubled by the incompatibility of the situation. That having Mary Chase meant killing her was logical to his hornet-sense. And that the process of killing her was also the process of "loving" her, was logical to his human-sense. Mr. Yellow Jacket knew no more about the fundamentals of that thing called love than any human philosopher. However, like Ken Johnson, he accepted it without question. Ken Johnson desired Mary Chase in his human way. Mr. Yellow Jacket had a human desire for her in his hornet way. Ken Johnson wanted to *kiss* Mary Chase and *had;* Mr. Yellow Jacket wanted to *sting* her, and he *would*. And Mr. Yellow Jacket was venomous, poisonous beyond all belief—Ken Johnson had made him so!

Accordingly, Mr. Yellow Jacket leered into the storm raging outside and complacently realized his human qualities. Perhaps a hornet would not venture—indeed, would not be *able* to venture—into such cold, but a human would, and Mr. Yellow Jacket was very much human. *He* would venture into it, and he *knew* where in that cold he would find Mary Chase. He had seen it in her mind!

A thin, cackling, *human* laugh filled the hollow log . . .

MARY Chase stood on the doorstep of the Church looking out into the storm. To her unscientific mind, the possibility of a blizzard in June was not so tremendous a phenomenon, but to her layman's opinion, it was highly unusual, amazing, baffling, and completely vexing. Her new blue spring coat was hardly warm enough for a long walk in such a storm, but it was not too thin either, because of her warm-blooded healthiness.

"If I stand him up again, he'll let me know about it!" she exclaimed to herself. "And I'm darned if I'll let him call me a sissy. I'll meet him if it snows up to my neck!" She smiled a little as she thought of what she'd say to him if *he* failed to meet her as scheduled. How she loved that young man, and how she loved to tease him! Yes, it would be worth the cold, either to meet him, or to be able to tease him.

She stepped resolutely out into the storm and bowed her head into the gale . . .

* * *

HOVERING over the Church in their ship, Samosen and Aura-

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cles looked at each other, appalled at how they had erred.

"You see what I mean about cold weather not having an effect on war in certain cases?" asked Samosen. "These Earth people are already aware that a weather change *could* upset their war plans, and they are preparing to go on fighting by training their troops, and driving their inventive genius to devise methods of combatting the cold. That is why they are conducting operations in what they call Alaska, and in the air over the North Pole. That is why they have chosen to fight a seemingly senseless war in Korea in the midst of the worst winter in decades. I'm afraid we'll have to do some really tremendous weather-changing to avert a destructive atom war. And I'm also certain we'll have to devise additional and less easy methods of circumventing it."

"I can see the truth of what you say," said Auracles. "It is more than evident here. Mary Chase, who is a high type of human, fools us by not being stopped by the cold, and Mr. Yellow Jacket, who is only a figment of Ken Johnson's imagination, will not be stopped either. If humans only knew how *real* their thoughts were, and how *real* they are making a future war by thinking and talking about it!"

"That's it!" yelled Samosen suddenly, clapping Auracles on the back so that he staggered under the weight of his assumed atomic structure. "You've *hit* on it!"

"Hit on what?"

"The reality of their thoughts! That's the answer to everything! We've got to make them *think*. And think rightly. We've got to make them *think* peace."

Auracles stared at him. "Yes," he said. "You're right! And I can begin to see already how many ways there are to do it! Say, we could even . . . "

Samosen stopped his sudden planning by gripping his arm. "Never mind that, right now. This minute we've got to save Mary Chase from Mr. Yellow Jacket. And there's only one way we can do it."

"How?"

"What was it brought Mr. Yellow Jacket into existence?"

"Ken Johnson's unwitting *thinking* did it!" said Auracles.

"Then that's how we've got to get rid of him! We've got to get to Ken Johnson and make him realize what he's done. Only *he* can undo it!"

Auracles groaned. "How can we do that? You know we can't make ourselves known to him."

"Remember what we heard on the mentascope?" asked Samosen excitedly.

"Some pretty terrific music," remembered Auracles. "Ken Johnson was creating that too, in imagination. As far as *that* goes, I'm glad it was real."

"And how did Ken create Mr. Yellow Jacket?"

"Well, he built him up gradually as a contemporary concept to a mental musical composition he was creating."

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"Exactly. And music *is* one of the contacts we can make with planetary humans! Don't you see, we can . . . "

"I *do* see!" yelled Auracles, leaping to the controls of their ship. "Get out your music, and I'll get us to where Ken Johnson is right now!"

AS Ken Johnson strode along the forest trail through the unusual June blizzard, his scientific mind was immersed in the possible cause of such an unheard of occurrence. And no matter what he thought of it, the thing took on more and more mystery. Here was something outside human experience. This was something no meteorologist could explain. It was outside the realm of the knowable, in the sphere of the mysterious . . .

In imagination he began to build up a concept of an invisible origination for unusual occurrences. Things outside the ken of mankind. All over the Earth, if one watched, weird, unexplainable things happened. Science puzzled over them, then dropped them to search into things more readily in mental reach. But they were there, none the less. And they were real.

Perhaps there were forces in the unseen that would yet be discovered . . .

Through Ken's mind, as it swung through the mysterious reaches of the mental world with the rhythm that Ken always employed in his thinking, a faint tone began to sound. It grew in his mind and he grasped it readily. The thought of Mary Chase, whom he *knew* would stubbornly persist in keeping their usual Sunday rendezvous, was so pleasing to him that the music built up into a happy lilt that bore him up to the heights of pleasure. Then suddenly a thought intruded.

"It's so *real,*" he whispered to himself. "It's always been so real. Much better than an actual instrumental interpretation. That's why I've always enjoyed it so much."

His face took on a frown of thoughtfulness. He went back in his mind to the music he had created mentally the day before. He thought of its sublime cosmic sweep. Then he thought of the hornet that had interrupted it.

The music in his mind stopped, was replaced by the strains of the music he had imagined concerning the hornet. He remembered the way he'd built up the hornet also. He shook his head.

"Wouldn't *that* be as real?" he whispered to himself. And suddenly he knew that it *would*. Aghast, he stopped in his tracks. "What if that monstrous thing *did* become real?" he exclaimed to himself. "It would be horrible. Such a thing shouldn't ever happen! And it won't, not if *I* have anything to do with it!"

Fiercely he clenched a fist, and aloud he spoke. "Mr. Yellow Jacket," he said. "You aren't real! You don't exist. You never did exist.

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You never *can* exist!"

Then, resuming his forward stride, he began to chuckle at the way his imagination had got the better of him, and the extremes to which it had influenced his emotions.

"Got to cut out that day-dreaming . . ." he began.

Ahead of him in the storm he heard a scream, and in an instant he was racing forward.

"Mary!" he shouted, sudden inexplicable terror gripping him.

Then he came upon her.

She was lying in the snow, a huddled heap, her blue-clad shoulders shaking with frightened sobs. He leaped forward, gripped her to him and lifted her up.

"Mary! Mary, what's the matter? Are you hurt? What happened?"

"Oh Ken," she sobbed. "It was horrid. A nasty hornet as big as my head flew at me and tried to sting me. It snatched at my throat with its little hands . . . Then it—vanished."

The blood froze in Ken's veins. "Hands . . . ?" he croaked. "A hornet as big as your head? Honey . . . hornets don't have hands . . ." he faltered and stopped. "I should never have joked about that hornet I imagined! You've been day-dreaming too. You've imagined the whole thing."

She looked up at him. "Imagined it? But Ken, it snatched at me. I *felt* it. It took my ruby clasp . . ."

She felt at her neck and grew paler. "It's gone . . ." She looked around, and suddenly uttered a cry. "There it is, lying in the snow!"

Ken stooped and picked it up and restored it to her blouse with hands that trembled from more than the cold. "Right where you dropped it when you fell," he laughed.

"Dropped it?" questioned Mary. "But the pin wasn't opened and my blouse is torn . . ."

"Don't think about it," said Ken soothingly, putting an arm around her, and forcing her to move with him along the trail in the direction he had just come. "Just don't think about it."

* * *

"YOU know," said Samosen, "we're a cinch to pass that Assistant Co-ordinator test now."

"How come?" asked Auracles, still breathing a little tensely from the events of the past few moments.

"Ken Johnson has just given us the third clue we need to carry it to a successful conclusion."

"And that?"

"Don't think about what you *don't* want."

"And think about what you *do!*" finished Auracles triumphantly. "And that goes for *us* as well as Earth people. Working together, how can we fail?"

Samosen grinned. "We can't," he said.

THE END

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BEYOND THE DARKNESS

By S. J. Byrne

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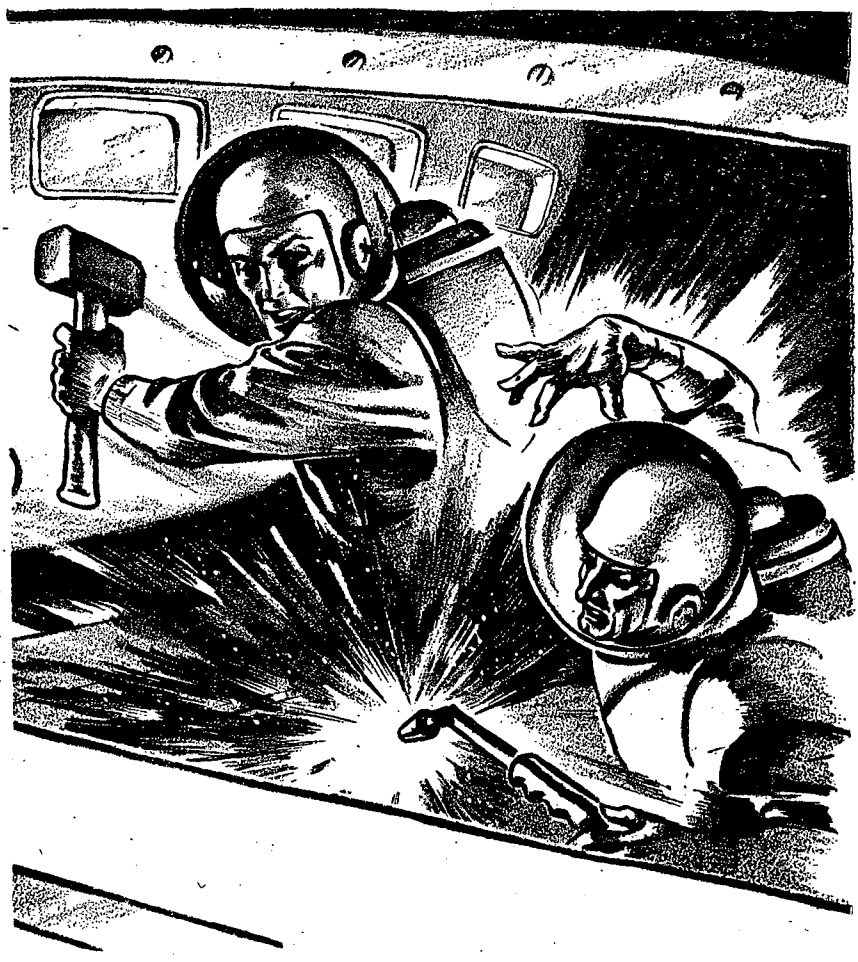

Beyond the Door was Darkness, and beyond the Darkness . . . what? Nad knew it was important that he find out what secret the Navigators guarded so jealously, even though he knew that disaster had a habit of overtaking those who asked too many questions.

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LYLWANI'S slender, pink hands clutched Nad's arm.

"Do we have to look?" she said rather than asked.

Nad's bushy, blond brows only lowered over his gray eyes and his mouth tightened into a scowl of hate and defiance as he watched the execution.

"Those are orders," he said. "Orders! Always orders! Disobey or even question an order and you get what *he's* going to get!"

Nad's red-headed younger brother, Ron, nervously shifted the almost negligible weight of his frail body from his club foot to his good one and drew in closer to Nad.

"Be careful!" he hissed. "You'll be overheard!"

His round, blue eyes surveyed the faces of the hundred or so Passengers gathered there, and his female companion, holding his hand, felt in it the reflection of his terror. Yldra, she of the long blue hair and the pale white skin, had lost her customary smile, and her great, dark eyes glistened on the verge of tears.

"Poor Gradon!" she said to Ron. "He was so good and kind. Now he goes to the Abyss . . . !"

A frightened murmur arose from the crowd of Passengers as *the Door* slid soundlessly aside, exposing them all momentarily to the execution chamber that would soon open into the Abyss. Sargon M-13-NT, Navigator, shoved old Gradon unceremoniously into the large chamber, and *the Door* closed upon him forever.

Through its crystal clear substance they could see Gradon plainly. He turned his back on the dark destruction that approached him and faced all his old friends, a weary smile on his kindly face. As Sargon reached for the control valve, Gradon waved goodbye not only to those present but to those other thousands of Passengers who had been ordered to witness his execution in the visiplates.

Then the valve turned, and the Passengers hid their faces.

But Sargon shouted at them. "Look! As you persist in seeking the answers to the Unknown, so shall you be sent *into* it—into the Abyss, from which there is no return! Thus the discontented and the trouble-makers shall die! *Look,* I said!"

And the squad of Navigators with him sprayed the Passengers with pain ray until they looked.

By the time Nad's party looked up, there was nothing much left to see. A frozen splatter of blood on the outer surface of *the Door,* and beyond — mystery of mysteries, especially to Nad—was the gaping opening into the Abyss.

Out there was gray-black nothingness. Why? What was it? Was it only another type of wall, a wall of endlessness beyond impenetrable walls of metal? Walls of cryosite, resistant to the terrific blows of meteors form the Abyss. Walls of emptiness and the Unknown. Walls of the mind. Seek not! Know not! Obey and be content— or die like Gradon, one of the finest men Nad had ever

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known.

As some of Gradon's closest friends cried aloud in their bereavement, the outer door to the Abyss closed, and Sargon and his men moved toward Nad's group. Nad knew this was not without premeditation, for Sargon had evidenced a marked interest in Lylwani for some time.

As Lylwani stepped close to Nad and Ron and Yldra stepped deferentially aside to make way for Sargon, Nad's lifelong frustration and indignation burst their bonds. He stepped in front of Sargon and deliberately blocked his path.

Nad was tall, lean, tense and white. His gray eyes met Sargon's black stare unwaveringly. Sargon was slightly taller, broader of shoulder, and thicker in the limbs and neck. His reddish complexion deepened visibly in sudden rage, and his thick, leonine mane of jet-black hair seemed to bristle.

"Well, idiot!" he snapped. "Step aside! Haven't you learned your lesson yet?"

"Yes," replied Nad, in a strangely subdued tone of voice, "I have learned my lesson. You have *all* the advantages and we have none. I only intend to make a constructive suggestion, with your permission."

Ron whimpered in his fright and tugged at his brother's arm, but Nad waved him back, impatiently.

"It had better be constructive," warned Sargon. "Speak, man! We haven't got all day!"

One of the other Passengers, an old, gray-haired man with pale blue eyes and a leathery skin, crowded close to listen as Nad spoke.

"The occasional trouble you experience with us Passengers would be eliminated," Nad said, "if you simply gave us more information. For instance—"

"Information!" shouted Sargon. "There *is* no information! This is the world in which you were born, and here you will live and die! Why must you grow discontented when you are adequately supplied with food, clothing and shelter and entertainment without having to work for it? Here there are only seven thousand of you, with kilometers of spacious room in which to live and play. Yet you complain! You do not trust the Navigators upon whom your life and welfare depends. It is because of this ungratefulness on your part that we have lost patience with you, and these disciplinary measures will continue to be taken until you accept the advantages with which you have been provided! What *more* do you want!"

"Sargon," said Nad, unmoved by this tirade, "do you know your own father?"

"Of course, stupid! I—" Then Sargon bit his lip and he reddened visibly. He had been tricked into an admission he would not have made otherwise.

"You see, that's the difference between the Navigators and the Passengers," said Nad, rapidly. "We don't know who our parents were, and parents can't recognize their own children. The only reason I call Ron-E-

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251-P my brother is because you have told me he is my brother, and that was perhaps unintentional on your part. You Navigators have memory. You have deprived us of that so that we will forget. Forget *what*, Sargon? What is it you Navigators are so afraid that we will remember?"

Sargon's big fists clenched. "Shut up!" he blurted out. "Do you want what Gradon got?"

Nad heard other Passengers gasp in alarm. Lylwani called out his name pleadingly and Ron ran away, taking Yldra with him. But the old man with the pale blue eyes drew even closer as he watched Nad.

As Sargon advanced slowly upon him and Nad slowly gave way before him, the latter continued. Now that he had started he could not stop himself.

"Our language is filled with strange words that we use without realizing their full significance," he said rapidly. "Why do you say 'day' or 'night' or 'month' or 'year'? What is the true meaning of these strange divisions of time where time never varies? You say that here there are only seven thousand Passengers. Are there more elsewhere? What *is* a Passenger, actually, other than a man or a woman who is not a Navigator and who is forbidden to enter section N or M? Why is it such an advantage not to have to work? Did Passengers work before? At what—and where? These walls that separate us from the Abyss were made by men. What was here before men knew enough to make them? Why are we three distinct types of people? There are the pale, blue-haired ones, such as Yldra V-57-P, and there is a second kind, like myself and my brother, who have the letter E attached to our names. Then there is the third type, like Lylwani here, with a pinkish complexion and jet-black hair like yours. You are Sargon M-13-NT and she is called Lylwani M-781-P. Your kind has the letter M attached to all your names. You say this is our natural world in which we have been born, yet you have also mentioned the 'growing problem' of inbreeding. I have heard the Navigator medicos remark that my brother's club foot is the result of the problem. I can only conclude that our present state is not a natural one, but rather—"

At that moment, Sargon struck Nad with all his might, and he went down hard on the metal floor with blood spurting from his lower lip. Lylwani dropped instantly beside him.

"I let you talk," said Sargon, "so that you would incriminate yourself completely. You will be executed, of course."

"Why!" cried Lylwani, rising quickly to her feet and facing him. "His crime is only recognizable in relation to arbitrary opinion on your part! What good will it do to destroy him, too? A thousand more will ask the same questions!"

Sargon's thick lips curled in amusement as he surveyed the lithe young woman before him, but secretly he admired again, as he had so often in

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the past, her long, raven-black hair lying across her shapely, pink shoulders, and he hungered for her full, young lips while he thrilled at the fiery spirit that stared at him out of her dark green eyes.

"Don't get yourself in trouble, too, beautiful," he said. "Take him away and get out of my sight, both of you!"

"But will he be executed?" Lylwani persisted, as Nad rose slowly to his feet.

Sargon raised his thick brows as though surprised by the question. "Naturally!" he said. And then he walked away with his men.

"Oh Nad! Nad!" cried Lylwani, throwing her arms around his neck. "I couldn't live without you! They can't kill you! They can't!"

Nad was apparently obvilious to all this. He did not feel the many sympathetic hands that touched him or hear the voices of the Passengers as they crowded thickly about him. His gray eyes only stared at Sargon's receding back.

"If anything will preserve me," he said, wiping more blood from his lip, "it will be hate—and the will to live until my hands have closed around Sargon's fat neck. They won't be able to take me until I have done at least that!"

IN the high arching tube ramp that crossed above the great Recreation Center, Ron and Yldra hurried toward their own section, where they knew at least Lylwani would eventually return. A quarter kilometer below them, through the transparent metal floor of the tube, they could see over a thousand Passengers returning listlessly to their amusements, some bathing in giant pools of chemically treated water, others playing games or working out on exercise machines. Some Passengers flew transparent globes in changing formations far above the floor, engaging in an aerial game called three-dimensional chess. All around the gigantic chamber were countless observation tiers and refreshment mezzanines, where observers looked down at the activities below or watched the aerial chess game. Ron and Yldra had seen all this for as long as they could remember. It was their unchanging world, without beginning or end.

In the middle of the ramp they were suddenly confronted by Krylorno, the poet, whose well-known poems had so often alluded openly to Yldra. Tall, lean, dark of complexion and extremely acquiline of feature, he deliberately blocked Ron's path, fixing his hypnotic eyes upon him. Behind him crowded a group of almost a hundred other Passengers, many of whom were relatively close acquaintances of both Yldra and Ron. They were of the younger set, mostly, and appeared to be emotionally geared to the strange fanaticism that lighted the face of Krylorno.

Krylorno, the silver-tongued, sneered at Ron. "Well, Club Foot, we saw your cowardly performance in the visiplates. Why did you desert your brother in the most heroic

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moment of his life? If he was moved to confront his tormentors at last, why did you not stand firm beside him instead of slithering away in the torrent of your fears? Can you name any valid reason for prolonging your meaningless existence? For what is left but the validity of heroism? Of what use is a groveling coward?"

Ron's thin face paled and he seemed to be on the verge of tears, but Yldra defended him.

"Have you not heard of instinct?" she said, in the soft, benevolent tones that were the reflection of her well-beloved personality. She smiled sadly as she continued. "Whatever life may be, we all have an instinct to cling to it, and in times of stress and terror this instinct of self-preservation is like a mother that defends its child against reason. Ron is not alone. I am confused as he is, and so, I am sure, are the rest of you. So give us peace and let us pass!"

"Wait!" persisted Krylorno, addressing her. "Why you care for this coward I cannot imagine, but if you do, then perhaps you would prefer to have him embrace the greatest advantage life can offer."

"And that is?"

"The single reality of *death*," he answered, solemnly.

Ron stared at Krylorno and trembled. Yldra's wondering gaze wandered from Krylorno's enigmatic face to the fanatic faces of his followers. Then she sought his eyes again.

"I do not understand," she said.

Krylorno laughed. Suddenly, as he answered her, his voice deepened and seemed to fill the ramp tube.

"Oh Darkness that is Light!" he chanted.

"Oh mighty Judge that offers peace forever in abyssmal night!

"Oh Truth that gives me naked Nothing for falsely vested life,

"Where in an instant that is ever I may be free of Wrong or Right!"

He glared now at Ron and his voice crescendoed.

"Oh take me from this putrid shell,

"This delusion-veined mirror of life's hell,

"And swallow up the atoms of my being in the freedom of oblivion

"Beyond this dungeon cell!"

He grasped Ron's white tunic and pulled him close. "Do you understand me?" he asked.

"No!" Ron cried out. "You are insane! Let me go!"

"Krylorno!" Yldra exclaimed, separating the two. "Whatever are you driving at?"

Krylorno waved his hand at his followers. "We are all of the same opinion," he answered. "Life is meaningless. We prefer death. It is the only truth we can conceive of. It is release from all torment and frustration. Why not join us?"

"You mean—mass suicide?" Yldra blanched swiftly and looked at her friends in alarm.

"Yes!" Krylorno triumphed. "Why not! It's painless in the disposal tubes. You enter the dumping locks, a valve is turned, and your worries are over. You explode out into the Abyss like Gradon did. There's nothing to it!"

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Yldra's eyes glistened in her consternation. "But that's hideous! It's —it's rank insanity!"

"No!" exclaimed Krylorno. "It is ultimate intelligence! Do you think his empty farce of life without memory, freedom or reason is worth clinging to? Only in the clarity of approaching death can we appreciate the magnificence of our decision to die. In a few hours we will be one with the Abyss, so leave this limping coward to cling to his rag of an existence and join us in the glory of oblivion!"

At that moment, the sonophone beneath a nearby visiplate rasped into life, and a strange voice addressed specifically those who were gathered at that one location on the tube lamp. The voice was strange because it was obviously not that of a Navigator. All the Passengers had been trained throughout their lives to recognize the arrogant, dictatorial tones of the Navigators. This voice was kind, patient — even fatherly. Moreover, it activated only the single sonophone in their vicinity, leaving the visiplate blank, which was an unprecedented occurrence.

"Man has a magnificent purpose to accomplish in the living flesh," the voice said. *"We should be willing to accept death only when we have contributed all we can toward the accomplishment of that purpose. This purpose has been hidden from you by the Navigators who have robbed you of memory so that you would not revolt. It cannot be explained to you until you have been informed of many more facts for which there is no time at present...But there is a purpose which you will only defeat by seeking death prematurely. You must be patient and cling to your lives as your most precious possession—until the time of liberation arrives . . . "*

All present were too astonished to speak, except Krylorno. He stepped in front of the blank visiplate and said, "Who speaks to us of liberation without showing his face?"

Immediately, the two-way sonophone replied, *"Your question must remain unanswered until the time comes. And if you truly seek an answer to your existence, if you wish for a real reason for living, and if you are desirous of a true, constructive change in your status of life, then tell no Navigator you have heard my voice—because otherwise they might subject you to the M-Ray again."*

"What is the M-Ray?" asked Krylorno.

"It is that which they have used against you to rob you of memory. I can say no more, but I will contact you and certain other Passengers again. In the meantime, you may refer to me among yourselves as—X."

There ensued a long moment of silence, after which Yldra found her voice and said, "Then it is as Nad suspected all along."

"What do you mean?" Krylorno asked her, staring at her intently.

"The Navigators are withholding knowledge from all of us. There is

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some greater meaning to all this other than just living and eating and sleeping and trying endlessly to amuse ourselves with senseless games." Her dark eyes were wide with excitement. She turned to Ron and grasped his hand. "Let's see if we can find Nad," she said. "We must tell him of this message. And you—" She stopped to look back at Krylorno. "Use that persuasive tongue of yours to keep us all together and *alive*. Do you think the Navigators would care if you committed mass suicide? They are only looking for excuses to reduce our numbers. Did you ever think that there are only a few hundred of them against thousands of us?"

For once, Krylorno was at a loss for words. But Yldra's friends, and the others who had followed Krylorno raised a cheer for her.

"She's right!" they cried. "And so is X."

"Yldra," said Ron, as he limped along beside her. "You are beautiful and intelligent. Why do you care for me?"

Yldra looked at him curiously. "Don't ask me to explain that, Ron," she answered. "There is no explanation, except that—well, we've been together since as far back as I can remember. I— I don't know any other way of life."

"I love you, Yldra."

"You're sweet."

"I'm a worthless coward."

"You only imagine that you are. Come on! We've got to find Lylwani— and Nad, if he has not been arrested already. . . ."

NAD and Ron, like all other single, adult, male Passengers, shared quarters with several other men. Each unit of this type consisted of ten private rooms with a common bath. Meals were taken in large mess rooms serving a hundred such units, so no unit could boast of its own dining room. However, common to each unit was a small reception and recreation room where friends of both sexes could be entertained.

Yldra and Lylwani lived in a similar unit shared by single women. If a man and woman desired each other as mates, they found it necessary to adhere to a strict rule of the Navigators. They would apply to the authorities for permission to live together, and once this was granted there was seldom any permission given to separate again, chiefly because of the nature of the marriage process. Marriage was officially recognized when a pair authorized to live together produced a child, at which time they were considered to be bound together for life. Cohabitation was permitted for an indefinite period without children, and couples who had not reproduced were permitted to separate upon proper application to the authorities, although such a circumstance was rare. Only if they reproduced were they considered to be married and inseparable, however. Promiscuity was not permitted, entirely on the basis of practical rather than moral reasons.

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It was in the recreation room of Nad's unit where Nad, Ron, Lylwani and Yldra contacted each other again, and Yldra told Nad about the mysterious voice. She had to speak in a very low tone because of the ever present sonophones. It would be practically suicidal, she knew, for them to let such talk be intercepted by the Navigators. Ron, as usual, was worried. He tried to take Yldra out of the room in case the Navigators suddenly decided to investigate.

But Nad detained him. "Not this time, Ron," he said, grimly. There was a new, intense expression on his face. "We're all in this together. Whatever it is we're going to do we'll do together or die in the attempt! You'll stick with us now, every step!"

"But Nad!" Ron protested. "If we are arrested we'll not be able to do anything! Besides, what *can* we do even if we are not arrested for all this mysterious talk, or even if you are not executed as Sargon says you will be? What is our purpose or plan? What's it all about?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," Nad replied. "I've got to find this 'X' person and work with him. If the price is my life or your lives, it's worth it!"

"No!" protested Ron.

"Yes!" said Lylwani and Yldra in unison.

And Lylwani added, "You're right, Nad. There is no purpose in mere existence here unless we can unravel the whole mystery and see where we are going."

Nad had been lost in thought, momentarily, but now he looked up suddenly at Lylwani, his eyes wide in astonishment. "What did you say?" he demanded rather than asked.

"I said we've got to clear up this whole mystery and— and—"

"And *what!*" He glared at her, a triumphant smile on his lips.

"And— see— where we are going . . . "

"Exactly!" he exclaimed, smacking the palm of his hand with his fist. *"We're going somewhere!* We're on a journey! This metal-walled world of ours is like one of the flying globes used for the aerial chess games in the Recreation Hall. It is moving *through* the Abyss! The Navigators have erased our memory of where we really came from!"

He paced rapidly back and forth in front of his astounded little audience. "That means there was another life on the *outside*, at the beginning of the Abyss somewhere. And maybe— maybe there is a new life, after we *cross* the Abyss! Or maybe —" He paused, staring into nothingness.

"Maybe what, Nad?" Lylwani asked, excitedly.

"Maybe the Navigators are lost and won't admit it . . . "

AT that moment, without warning, two Navigators stepped into the room. It was too late for anyone to do anything. The Navigators, young and arrogant in their esoteric know-

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ledge, immediately approached Nad and seized him.

"Come along!" said one of them. "Sargon's orders!"

In a wholly unexpected move, Nad broke their grips on him and ran for the corridor. Both Navigators fired Stun Rays after him, but he was shielded by the metal walls just in time.

Much to the surprise of Nad's friends remaining in the reception room, the two young guards only grinned at each other and shrugged. One of them reached over to the wall and unlocked a small compartment with a master key. Inside the compartment was a switch that tied the sonophone in the room to all the others in the system. Once the switch was thrown, the operator had at his disposal a universal public address system.

"Alert! Alert!" he called into the instrument. "All guards! Capture escaped Passenger condemned to execution, Nad E-250-P, last seen in Q sector, deck fifteen. He is unarmed. When captured, bring prisoner to H. Q. That is all!"

The guard who had made the announcement locked up the converter switch box and turned to his companion.

"Is that guy crazy?" he asked. "How does he figure he has a chance?"

When they had left the room, Ron was near to fainting in his terror. "You see? You see?" he said, hysterically. "Now he's got us all into trouble!"

Lylwani had a far away look in her eyes. Silently, she left the room. Ron stood there trembling in his helplessness, for even if he had possessed courage he lacked the knowledge of what to do. Yldra covered her face and began to cry . . .

LYLWANI presented herself to the astonished guard and said simply, "I have come to see Sargon." She gave him her name.

While she waited outside the great cryosite door, she could not suppress a feeling of terror. She had asked permission to enter section N, forbidden heretofore to all Passengers except women taken in as the chosen mates of the Navigators. Strange and terrifying were the imagined tales she had heard concerning this place, which was the citadel of the Navigators. Childlike in her ignorance, she half believed she would never emerge from the place once she entered it. But her purpose was fixed unshakeably in her mind. What she was doing was the only solution she could conceive of—for Nad. She was sure that the mysterious person known as X held the answer to all their problems, and if Nad could be free to join forces with X one day, it would be far more important than her own personal destiny.

The guard returned with a second Navigator, who led her to Sargon, Chief of the Navigator guards. So confused was her perception due to her increasing misgivings that she failed to notice anything unusual about the shining corridors through

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which she was taken, until she was admitted to Sargon's own office.

This was not at all like the Passenger type living quarters or reception rooms. It was unusually spacious and comfortable, as though it had been designed for an officer of much higher rank than that of Sargon. On the floor was a soft, furry substance that felt luxurious under her thin sandals as she walked across it. Its strange, soft fibers were of purest white and she could not imagine of what it was composed. Even Sargon's desk was of an alien substance —pure black, but like glass and scintillating with lights inherent within itself. On the walls were curious pictures which she could not understand at all. Among them was a very unintelligible one under glass, and beneath it was a metal plate bearing the meaningless title: *Nebula in Andromeda* . . .

Sargon sat inscrutably at his desk, but he motioned her to a large cushioned chair beside him. It was such a chair as Lylwani had never sat in before— soft and caressing, seeming to cradle her whole body like a cloud.

"Why have you come here?" he asked. "Is it because of Nad? His career is just about at an end, you know." He watched her intently.

Lylwani sat up wide-eyed. "Then they did capture him?" she said.

Sargon's brows lowered to emphasize a penetrating gaze. "What *else* could happen?" he asked.

Lylwani lowered her head to hide her face, and her long, dark hair fell across her shoulders, but Sargon noticed that they trembled. He rose to his feet and stood looking down at her.

"You have come to request leniency for him," he told her. "What would you offer in return?"

Lylwani looked up at him, suddenly struggling for self-composure. "You want me," she said, tonelessly. "Give him freedom and I will bear you child." In the language of the Passengers there was no actual word for marriage.

A light leaped into Sargon's eyes but was gone almost in the same instant. "A Navigator's woman remains forever within section N," he replied. "You would have to be content never to see Nad again."

By now, Lylwani's face had lost its natural, pinkish complexion. It was white. And her voice was like that of an automaton as she spoke.

"Let me see him free, and I will be your woman," she said.

Sargon chuckled. "What makes you think I would not take you anyway?" he asked. "I have planned it this way for a long time."

Lylwani's eyes widened. "But that is against Navigator law!" she protested. "Not even a Passenger woman may be forced—"

"Forget it," Sargon interrupted. "There are many things you don't know—too many things. Startling and amazing things, Lylwani. Things that would enable you to understand why we Navigators are doing what the Passengers believe to be unreasonable, even though we do it for their own protection. I have wanted

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to share this knowledge with you, as well as certain personal triumphs, but that will only be possible when you have became my mate. I promise you I will do all I can for Nad if you promise to stay here now and be content never to return to the Passengers."

For answer, Lylwani buried her head in the gas-foam cushions of her chair and cried uncontrollably. But for Sargon it was answer enough . . .

WHEN Nad ran from his own quarters to escape the Navigator guards, he had in mind a certain destination known as V sector, where there were whole batteries of living units unassigned. Vaguely, he tried to formulate some plan of action as he ran, but he could not yet see his way clear beyond the mere possibility of hiding out for a very brief period in V sector.

Passengers in the corridors instantly made way for him as he ran, in spite of the warning cry of the Navigator guard over the sonophones. There was a sickly expression of incomprehension on most of their faces. They could not understand resistance or flight. Why resist or flee? Where could one go? It was easier to give up. Surrender to the Navigators if they want you. Death was a certainty. Life, at its best, was a monotonous, meaningless effort.

But Nad ran for his life, and he felt that he was running, too, for *all* their lives. This hopeful premonition gave him a new strength, courage and determination such as he had never known before. Something seemed to whisper: *Now! The time has arrived! Make a break for it!*

On deck eighteen, near V sector, the Navigators began to close in on him. Panting loudly, he ran down a passage and suddenly ducked into a deserted room. With narrowed eyes glaring like those of a wild animal at bay, he thought rapidly and with a new clarity and confidence that was in itself exhilarating to him. He knew, somehow, that he would make good his escape, for the simple reason that there was no room for failure now. A grim smile crept across his lips as a new plan began to take shape in his mind.

Cautiously, he stepped into the corridor and darted onward to a doorway farther along in the direction he had chosen. By this means he finally arrived at another intersection. Before entering it, he heard the running feet of several guards, and he pressed his back to the cold wall, waiting.

Just as the two guards dashed into view, Nad lunged across their path horizontally, and they tripped helplessly on their faces. With a lightning quick movement, Nad leaped into the air and came down with both heels squarely on the head of one of the guards, who went limp in the same instant. The other guard rolled over and lifted his Stun Ray just as Nad kicked him squarely in the face. In the next instant he had acquired their weapons.

With one guard slung over his

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shoulder, he darted along a new corridor, moving from door to door. Gradually, he neared his objective, which was the disposal room for V sector. As he entered the room, he paused a moment to listen for sounds of pursuit. He could hear the bedlam raised by the sonophones, but nothing else. Then he moved swiftly.

He went to the nearest dumping lock and opened it, dumping his limp burden inside. Then he paused again. His lips tightened as he looked down at the unconscious guard. This was the part of the plan he could little stomach, but it had to be carried out.

Grimly, he braced himself. Then, leaving the lock open, he pulled the disposal valve. There was a roar of escaping air as the guard's body slipped into the vacuum of the disposal chute. The dumping lock door slammed, but did not shut, and air screeched through the remaining crack, making a sound that drowned out the sonophones.

Crawling on his belly against the air blast, Nad got through the doorway of the disposal room before automatic safety devices caused a metal hatch to slide into place, sealing the room hermetically. An alarm gong rang, which he assumed had been installed for such emergencies. He remembered having heard such alarms ring long ago when they said a galactite had pierced the walls. The gong was one of the things he had hoped for. It would bring them to the evidence, which he hoped they would interpret, at least temporarily, as suicide on his part. The other guard he had kicked was dead, so it would take them some time to figure out just who had gone out the disposal tube. He had deliberately left the dump lock door jammed, because a man committing suicide would not have been able to close it from inside. Careful inspection would prove that a human body had gone out the chute, he mused, remembering Gradon's frozen blood on the outer surface of the door of the execution chamber.

"From here," Nad said under his breath, "I've got to disappear."

For hours, however, the Navigators continued their search. Evidently they wanted to find either him or the missing guard, to make the evidence conclusive. As he moved from hiding place to hiding place, he began to lose some of his confidence. The hide and seek could not go on indefinitely. Nor could he fight off a squad of Navigators, once they found him. They might even use the M-Ray on him.

Suddenly, he passed the doorway of a room that was unexpectedly occupied, and someone called out his name. He caught a brief glimpse of an old, gray-haired man with pale blue eyes and a leathery skin, the same who had been present at Gradon's execution. His inclination was to run when he saw the strange weapon the other carried in his hand, but when he realized that the old man was no Navigator he paused and looked back. The old man was in the doorway, beckoning to him.

"Come with me quickly!" he said.

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Something told Nad to follow this stranger, and he did. As running feet neared them in the corridor, the old man extinguished the lights of the room and led Nad into the dimness of an inner apartment. There in the wall was a black hole just large enough to squeeze through. The old man went in first and Nad followed. He found himself on a metal catwalk between metal walls. He could feel cables and conduits running in all directions.

The old man closed the opening and fastened several bolts in place. "This is called a maintenance hatch," he explained. "They are very little used nowadays. Most of the Navigators have neglected their knowledge of real maintenance. You'll be safe in here until they really start looking for you."

"Where are we?" said Nad. "And how did you know about this place? Who are you?"

"We are between the walls," came the answer. "This is a vast maze of narrow passages of which the Passengers have no knowledge. I have always known about it because I never lost my memory. I am 'X,' my son, and you have come to me just in time."

SO it was that a new phase of Nad's existence actually began. The old man told him his name was Yiddir E-5172-P, but as time went on Nad began to suspect that this was an alias disguising a much more important identity than a mere Passenger. The man knew too much. In fact, as far as Nad was concerned, he was an oracle, willingly supplying him with all the knowledge he could absorb.

Yiddir led him, with amazing self-confidence and sure-footedness, through narrow, incomprehensible labyrinths and across dizzying catwalks below which gaped dark recesses the depths of which he could not guess. If what he had known before was a world unto itself, so was this. He seemed to be making a journey born of delirium, into the heart and veins and bowels of a monstrous, living creature.

Everywhere, Yiddir had reason to use new words to describe what he saw. There were "control relays" and "power cut-offs" and "master circuits" and "reactor shields," and things incomprehensible without end, until Nad's brain hurt.

Finally, they arrived at Yiddir's destination, his private little citadel. It was an empty chemical tank into which he had diverted a tap from the ventilating system. There were small lockers for supplies of food and water and a few simple articles of furniture. A mattress, a small chair, a box that served as a table, and so on. But there were objects of a more technical nature that went beyond Nad's understanding. He could understand the glow tubes Yiddir had rigged for lighting purposes, and the visiplate and sonophone and even their accompanying converter switches, but one whole end of the tank was a workshop containing a jumble of instruments and equipment that

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was totally foreign to him. He only grasped that in this secret chamber a very advanced person had lived and worked for perhaps many years of time. Here, at last, was the knowledge and the help he sought. This was the home of "X."

When they had both rested somewhat, Yiddir began to talk to him in earnest, and for Nad the time for great revelations was at hand:

"Have you any concept of what a year of time is?" Yiddir asked him.

"Only that it is a very long period —part of a lifetime, I guess."

"You could not conceive of a period of five hundred years, could you?"

"Perhaps six or seven lifetimes?" Nad suggested.

"Something like that," Yiddir replied. "Well, five hundred years ago, we human beings lived on real worlds; indeed, even three hundred years ago. I'll tell you later what those worlds were like, but suffice it to say, they were natural worlds incalculably larger than this ship you are now in. There were three worlds of principal importance, from which all Passengers and Navigators are descended. There were Venus, Earth and Mars, together with other less developed worlds, revolving each in its own elliptical path about a flaming ball of fire which gave us all the heat and energy necessary to life. This huge ball of fire men referred to as the sun. Actually, it was one of innumerable similar suns called stars which in turn composed what was called the galaxy.

"Well, to make a long story short, hundreds of millions of people like you and me lived and prospered in a high form of civilization, and we were able to travel between Venus, Earth and Mars at will, for those distances were as nothing when compared with interstellar distances — that is—the distance between the stars.

"It was about five hundred years ago that men first knew that the solar system, of which Venus, Earth and Mars formed a part, was going to be destroyed by cataclysm. That is, a runaway star was moving rapidly toward our sun, and it was accurately calculated that within three hundred years the collision would definitely occur.

"This single fact bound our three worlds together with a single purpose in mind—to salvage the human race. To do this, it was considered necessary to invent a way of traversing the awful distance between the stars. Not only would it be necessary to go to the nearer stars but onward indefinitely, if necessary, seaching for a life-giving sun in whose system of planets there was at least one world that would be suitable as a new starting place for our kind. It would be necessary to extract cosmic energy from space and convert it into all desirable forms of matter, synthesizing out of basic elements all the molecular compounds necessary to the continuation of life. In short, the ships that were to save humanity had to be worlds independent of all other sources of sustenance except cosmic energy, itself.

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"The task seemed insurmountable at first, but the concentrated minds of thousands of our great scientists gradually evolved the required miracle, over the course of the next century and a half. Necessity forced upon Man a superman technology, and the great arks began to be built. As you may have guessed, you are a Passenger in one of them now. It took all the human resources of three worlds to build a hundred of these vessels in as many years. They are flying planets. They move at a speed greater than light, itself. This means that light trying to reach us from behind can never catch up as long as we maintain such a velocity, and light meeting us head on is shoved clear off the visible spectrum. The result is that behind us is blackness, ahead is blackness, and to either side of us is a halo-like grayness. We can only navigate by means of instruments, some of which employ energies referred to as second order phenomena, which function many times faster than light.

"Before certain events of which I shall inform you caused the fleet to divide, these arks of space travelled in a broad phalanx, each ship one light year distant from the other, which is equivalent to trillions of kilometers. The entire fleet of arks covered a space of one hundred light years, and even by using second order means of communication it sometimes took years thoroughly to relay messages to all ships. This will give you a small idea of the size of this great attempt on the part of human beings to preserve their species.

"So far, we have been under way for slightly more than two hundred years. We are already many generations descended from those who first started out, and we have traveled about six or seven hundred light years in search of a new home."

"But why haven't we found another world?" asked Nad. "And why have the Navigators deprived us of memory, and why are we executed for asking questions that few can resist asking? How did you, alone, escape the M-Ray, and what is this plan you have spoken of concerning liberation and a new way of life?"

Yiddir smiled, patiently. "One question at a time," he said. "First, it was learned within the first fifty years of this great voyage that our sun and the worlds we lived on were very unique, or rather we were especially adapted to live only under the exact conditions set up for us by Nature in our solar system. Many other suns and planetary systems were examined only to be found unsuitable to our needs. Infrequently did we find those other worlds to be inhabited, and only once were we threatened by alien space ships, but the only weapon we found it necessary to use against them was our far superior velocity. They could not follow us into the great darkness that lies beyond the speed of light.

"Another fifty year period passed, and yet another, and still we had not found what we were looking for. So the situation was when I was a young

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man, and even later, when I became Chief Navigator on board this ship."

"You!" cried Nad. "You were the Chief Navigator?" His mind reeled under this new shock of surprise.

"Yes," said Yiddir. "My real name is Korlon E-3-N, but therein lies a tale which is the third and final phase of this brief history I am giving you. You see, the present Navigators are outlaws. They mutinied against me."

"But don't the other ships know that by now?" protested Nad. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Thirty years or more."

"Thirty years! And you've remained hidden ever since?"

"Yes. But let me go on with my story . . . "

"AT times," Yiddir continued, "there were discoveries or circumstances confronting us which led to considerable argument, either among the Navigators or between Navigators and Passengers. About forty years ago, this ship encountered a region of space that appeared to give very promising signs that our goal had been reached. Analysis of the composition of energy patterns, the quality of nuclear radiations and spectrohelioscopic studies showed us that we were in a group of suns that did not seem to be inimical to life. Only one solar system, a rather large one, was found, which contained several large planets, all heavily populated. The problems that arose were the following. First, the civilizations on the planets we discovered were in a state of advancement almost equivalent to our own, and preliminary communications with them indicated that they would not welcome the influx of an alien race. Therefore, to force a landing would have precipitated a war against far superior numbers of people who possessed weapons that were worthy of our respect. Secondly, the sun at the center of this solar system was not any too young and had long since passed into that stage of evolution which scientists refer to as the disintegrant stage. Of course, our kind of life could have flourished yet for thousands of years there, but at the cost of fighting the increasing deleterious effects of hard radiation.

"In spite of this, our whole fleet divided strongly into two factions, one of which was in favor of invasion whatever the cost. The other faction was in favor of continuing our journey in the hope of discovering a more favorable set of circumstances. As I worked my way up to the highest office on board this ship, I adhered to this latter faction, and I trained my son also to hold this perspective of our situation.

"The opposing faction had almost become resigned to their lot when, ten years beyond the controversial solar system, I made a grave mistake. That was thirty years ago."

Yiddir paused, and his pale blue eyes sought Nad's. He saw there an expression of wonderment and awe, as well as the signs of an utterly insatiable thirst for knowledge.

"I was, like many of the higher officers in charge of the expedition,

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a research scientist, and my specialty was in the second order phenomena. Out of my research evolved a new weapon — the M-Ray. Under any normal circumstances, this would have been a boon to humanity, from a therapeutic point of view. That is, people suffering from mental strain or great sorrow at the loss of a loved one and so forth could be made to forget either temporarily or permanantly what was troubling them. But the M-Ray could also be used as a very formidable weapon. It could cause thousands or even millions of people to lose their memories and become as helpless as infants. Moreover, all alien energy shields we had encountered thus far were only of first order nature and therefore would not have been able to stop the M-Ray. In other words, here was a certain weapon against the inhabitable worlds we had contacted some years before.

"My mistake was to keep my weapon a secret, for the time being, for if I had taken it to the authorities on board our flagship they would now be in a position to cope with the terrible danger that threatens them and all the remaining ships that have not yet been taken over by the mutineers."

Nad interrupted. "Do you mean to say that Sargon's brand of Navigators have a foothold on other ships of the fleet?"

Yiddir nedded in bitter assent. "This has been going on for years," he answered.

"But how—"

"Let me continue. My further mistake was to take several other officers into my confidence, even against the advice of my son, who by now was a much more brilliant scientist than I, and who had contributed much to the development of the M-Ray.

"It so happened that one of my confidants was actually an opportunist and a sympathizer with the old opposition, but I did not know this at the time. It was this man who betrayed me and succeeded in producing M-Ray weapons superior to my own— and in effective quantity. The achievement went to his head and he gathered around him the most subversive forces among our number that he could find. He planned eventually to overthrow the government of the whole fleet and prepare for himself and his kind a small empire designed to his own tastes. Furthermore, his plan was to return to the inhabited planets in question and to subject all those races of people to M-Ray in preparation for occupation by his own forces. Even if it came to a matter of subjugating only a part of the fleet and turning back secretly, leaving the other portion to its own destinies, he was determined to carry the plan out.

"Again, my son sought to advise me. He argued that he and I must escape before it was too late. This ship, as you should know, is equipped with life boats which are capable of carrying a hundred or so Passengers. It was my son's plan to steal one of these and travel to the flag-

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ship, ten light years distant. Using second order type drive, this journey would have taken several years, but he was certain we could and should make it. Furthermore, he advised me that he was on the trail of just the discovery that would save the fleet government. He was close to developing a second order shield against the M-Ray, and he was confident he could complete it on board a friendly vessel such as the flagship.

"Having learned our lesson in caution by bitter experience, we decided each to take a lifeboat, so that if one of us were apprehended the other might still have a chance of making it.

"Just before we left, however, the Navigators, under their new leader, began their mutiny, and my son and I had to take refuge among the Passengers, whom we enlightened thoroughly concerning the whole situation. It was they who helped us effect our escape, although we were pursued. And we left behind us a ship caught in the throes of a grim war between Navigators and Passengers.

"I succeeded in distracting our pursuers sufficiently, I believe, to help my son escape, but in the process of escaping, myself, my ship was damaged, and after the pursuers abandoned the chase and gave me up for lost, I drifted about almost helplessly. It took me about three months to repair the damage and about a year to find the ship again.

"I was content to return here, because I knew that the Passengers and many of my old friends among the Navigators had by now been subjected to the M-Ray. Despite all rationalization, I felt responsible, not only as inventor of the M-Ray, but as the captain of my ship— a ship that had mutinied and was the seat of an unlawful government that planned to overthrow the fleet and eventually wage war on innocent worlds, subjugating millions of people to dictatorial rule.

"As one registered as dead, I enjoyed a particular advantage. Also, I had not lost my memory, and I knew the ship better than any Navigator on board. For years I have lived in secrecy, but a relatively short time ago something new developed that made it necessary for me to disguise myself as a Passenger. It was an easy matter for me to forge identifications and even place corroborative records in the files of the Navigators. Thus I created Yiddir E-5172-P, an inconsequential Passenger who was free to move about among you and select his allies. For my present venture I need about one hundred men and women, and you I have long since chosen as my principal aide."

"Me? Why pick on me?"

Yiddir smiled. "Look back on your actions that led to your escape today. Need you ask me more questions. I was not quite prepared to effect your escape according to my own well laid plans, and yet when your emergency arose you were capable of taking care of yourself."

Nad disregarded the compliment. "But did your son ever reach the

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flagship?" he asked.

Yiddir shrugged, resignedly. "How can I tell? I can intercept communications from the other arks, but I dare not try to transmit, for fear of discovery. All I have learned is that a new Fleet Governor is in charge of the flagship, who is apparently unaware of what has been going on here. However, he seems to be a very capable man. His name is Nor E-1-M. I should certainly like to contact him sometime, for I am sure he would make a worthy ally. But that would take years, and there is no time for that just now."

"But what about the mutineers' plan to turn back to the solar system they wanted to invade? When will they do that?"

Yiddir waved his hand. "My story is not yet at an end," he said, patiently. "Listen to me carefully . . ."

"I HAVE not been able to verify all the facts as yet," he continued, "but in rough analysis, the circumstances at present are as follows. The rebel Navigators have taken over a large portion of the fleet, just how much I cannot say, except that I know the flagship is still free and unaware of what has happened. Or else it may be that the rebels fear the flagship of Nor E-1-M, that perhaps some sort of resistance has been demonstrated. Anyway, the fact remains that this rebel portion of the fleet has already broken off from the main fleet, come to a stop, and turned back toward the solar system they plan to invade. It will take years to retrace those many light years of distance, but they are determined to do it. Meanwhile, the portion of the fleet that is still under Fleet Government is drawing further away from us all the time in the original direction taken by the expedition. Now, between our group of rebel arks and the Fleet Government arks lies the goal I am after. Listen . . .

"At the time that we slowed up to turn back, of course light from the stars was again perceptible and some important observations were made. I know that at that time the astrophysicists on board this particular ship discovered, in our own region of space, an inhabitable world. Oh it was a small one and not overly promising, because it was very young, geographically speaking. It was as yet uninhabited by the most primitive form of man, but was capable of supporting our kind. So mediocre was the find, however, that the rebel government in charge here decided not even to advise the rest of their representatives on board the other conquered ships. And of course the Fleet Government ships remained unadvised and were allowed to proceed on their way.

"However, it was the result of my own analysis of that region of space that stirred me into action. My own instruments revealed to me that there are other systems nearby which should have been investigated. I know this ship did some searching, but the job was not thorough, and they gave it up in order to keep pace with the other rebel ships now

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enroute to the inhabited solar systems they intended to invade.

"Now, therefore, my immediate plan of action is this. In the lifeboat lockers are, as I have mentioned before, many ships, each of which is capable of transporting a hundred Passengers with reasonable comfort. As they are capable of converting cosmic energy into matter and synthesizing just like the ark does, they can support human life as indefinitely as their mother ship. It is my plan to use one of those ships and effect the escape of about a hundred Passengers, preferably young men and women, and make our way back to that small, primitive world which the Navigators discovered, and establish a base there for further exploration to discover the other solar system or systems which my instruments have indicated must exist in that region. If we fail, at least we will have one small, primitive world at our disposal on which to start a new life. And then if the rebel fleet should meet with surprise opposition and get wiped out, or if the other arks fail in their search, at least our small group will serve to rescue our species from extinction."

Suddenly, Yiddir fell silent, and Nad knew that he had finished. Yet there were still more questions to be asked.

"All this is a fine plan," he said, "and you can never appreciate what it means to me to know at last what this life of ours is all about. What I don't like about your idea, however, is leaving the field wide open for the rebel Navigators such as Sargon and his kind."

"There is one faint possibility," said Yiddir, "that this great new master of the flagship, Nor E-1-M, might be in a position to cope with the rebels, but there is the risk that if I were to beam a communication to him, once we have made good our escape, it might be intercepted and result in precipitating on the Fleet Government a battle for which they are not prepared. I feel that it would be better not to take that risk, to let each segment of the fleet go its own way, so that there will be two chances of survival instead of one. Nor E-1-M has been hailed as a scientific genius, and I know that his section of the fleet is in good hands."

"It is too bad that your son, with his secret of M-Ray defense, could not have joined forces with Nor," said Nad. "It is obvious he did not, because if he had done so, by now the Fleet Government would have taken action against the rebels."

Yiddir sighed. "That too, is my conviction," he said. "I have lost my son."

Nad reached out and squeezed Yiddir's frail hand. "May I serve as a poor substitute?" he asked.

Yiddir's old face brightened. He grasped Nad's hand with both of his. "Substitute, no," he said. "You *are* my son, from this day forward."

"Thanks," Nad replied. "But there's just one thing you're not going to like."

"What is that?"

"I am not a complete altruist like

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you. I harbor a bitter hatred that must be satisfied. Before I leave here, I intend to throttle one Sargon M-13-NT."

Yiddir shook his head in disapproval. "You must forget that," he admonished. "Sargon is in high favor among the rebels. To expose yourself to him again would be to endanger the whole plan. You must learn to subordinate personal desires to the importance of your mission. Don't you think that I, too, was long tempted by vengeful desire? *This is my ship!*" Yiddir's eyes flashed anger. "But I held onto myself, and I pride myself that I acted in the best interests of the majority. I expect you to do the same."

The muscles lumped along Nad's jaws, and he clenched his fists, but he controlled himself. "All right," he grumbled. "Let's get to work on this plan of yours."

Yiddir beamed with pride and satisfaction. "That's the spirit, son! Self-control is your most strategic weapon now."

WHEN Nad and Yiddir acted, they worked swiftly. Contact was made with certain other Passengers on Yiddir's long prepared list, chiefly by means of individually activated sonophones. In the privacy of his own room, a likely recruit was addressed as follows:

"The day of liberation has arrived. You have been chosen to join us. We are returning to a natural world and a natural way of life. We have both the knowledge and the means. What was taken from your minds, your rightful heritage, will be restored by a complete revelation of the truth of your origin and your purpose. There is no time for questions. We must act swiftly. Go and contact ten of your friends, five of them young men and five of them young women. Caution them all to strictest secrecy or this whole plan will fail and your last chance will have been sacrificed. These ten people will contact only you. You have three hours to accomplish this. So act at once! When you are ready, or at the end of three hours maximum, bring your people to your own reception room and there you will be guided into liberation."

In the course of an hour, Nad and Yiddir thus contacted eight key men and women. It was almost time for them to start leading the first contacts and their recruits through various maintenance hatches between the walls when Nad finally tried to contact Lylwani.

Yldra was with Ron, in Ron's reception room. This time, Nad dared to activate the visiplate as well as the sonophone.

"Nad!" cried Yldra, leaping to her feet. "Where are you? We thought you were either captured or dead!"

"There is no time to explain," he said, while his eyes searched the room through the two-way visiplate. "Where is Lylwani?"

"We don't know," said Yldra. "After you escaped from the guards, she disappeared."

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Then Ron found his voice. "I think she tried some crazy scheme to save you, and the Navigators probably have her by now. Maybe Sargon."

"Sargon!" Nad's face blanched and his mouth tightened. "It can't be— not now, not at a time like this! She's got to be here! There's no time to lose!"

Quickly, he gave them his recruiting message, with extra explanations to help reassure Ron, and he deputized Yldra to gather up some of her friends.

The effect on Yldra was astonishing to Nad. As he told her the news, she seemed to come alive as though all her previous life had been lived in a shadow world. Now she seemed to perceive reality for the first time. In spite of her naturally pale Venusian complexion, a new color leaped to her cheeks and he eyes flashed with little fires of wild, new energy.

She turned to Ron and flung her arms around his neck. "Ron!" she cried. "It's come true at last! There is another world and another life! Ned's dream has come true! Quick! Let's go get Nilra and Gorn and Myrla and —"

She stopped, amazed, because Ron did not reflect any of her mood. Sweat stood out on his forehead and his mouth was agape, his eyes round with fear . . . .

"They'll kill us all!" he cried out. "It's mutiny! I'm innocent!" he yelled. "Innocent, do you hear! I want none of it! I want to stay right here!"

"Ron!" shouted Nad, in a tone which he seldom used with his brother. "Shut your mouth and don't speak another word. If you are so afraid of death, then remember this. Open your mouth once more as you have done just now and I will kill you myself!"

Ron was left speechless, as was Yldra.

"I can't help it, Yldra," Nad explained. "There is too much at stake. The whole future of humanity may be ruined by that sniveling coward. You keep him quiet if you want him to live or join us at all. Now hurry and assemble your friends in this room as quickly as you can. I'll give you two hours. In the meantime —I'm going to find Lylwani . . . . "

KRYLORNO, the poet, was a vain and sensitive man. Secretly, he resented the fact that no woman had as yet gone with him to the authorities to request permission for cohabitation. He was older than the crowd he chose to associate with by some ten years, but he did everything possible to conceal the difference as it was one of the sore points of his vanity. Another blow to his vanity was Yldra's inexplicable attachment to Ron. To think that she should prefer that club-footed, worthless coward to him!

He was thinking of these things when Ron and Yldra approached him. It was on one of the refreshment mezzanines overlooking the great Recreation Hall. Many of his previous "suicide" group were there,

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but they had become divorced from their fanaticism by the unprecedented message of "X". Since that moment a great, secret unrest had manifested itself among the Passengers. The Navigators had been able to gather that certain of the Passengers were discussing some great secret that they were somewhat unwilling to share with others of their number, and general Passenger speculation was running wild. The Navigators, suspecting that the whole thing was merely another manifestation of general discontent, had resorted to an experiment. They had released a previous ban on alcoholic refreshments, and the effect, in general, had been favorable already.

Whereas most of the Passengers had become cheerful, Krylorno had become more moody and sensitive than usual, and was consuming liquor in large amounts. Yldra's entrance with Ron was, therefore, the spark that kindled the smouldering fire.

When Yldra tried to engage certain younger members of the party in private conversation, he resented it at once. Also, his curiosity was piqued by the transformation that had come over her. Her face was radiant, her eyes flashed new life and vigor, as though her existence had taken on new meaning. She spoke rapidly and excitedly, but it was obvious that he, Kyrlorno, was being excluded deliberately.

Somewhat erratically, he walked over to her table with his half-filled glass. Everyone stopped talking as he began to give her a toast:

"She's made of dreams, or so it seems,
"For when she speaks to me,
"My thoughts are stilled and my heart is thrilled
"With a dreamy ecstasy;
"And in her eyes my reason dies
"And I am prison bound—"

He paused, with upraised glass, scowling at her and the others.

"I swear!" he said. "If you don't all look as though you resented my presence!"

No one said a word. Some hung their heads or looked away.

"Why!" he said, not pleadingly, but challengingly. "What is this secret business all about? Has the voice of 'X' been haunting you again from out of the Abyss? Has he said you shall exclude Krylorno from the great liberation?"

Yldra paled because Krylorno was shouting these words recklessly. She got to her feet quickly and came close to him. Her small hand clamped down over his mouth.

"Krylorno, listen to me," she said, softly. "You spoke to me recently great words about courage. You have demonstrated to everyone that you care for me. Now I am asking you to prove both. For my sake, and for the sake of all our kind, be still! This is the time of salvation for a few. There is neither time nor room for more. Perhaps your time will come later, but for the present Nad says they should all be young—"

"Young!" Krylorno fired back. "What do you think I am— an oc-

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togenarian?"

Again the small hand closed his lips, and her dark eyes sought his, pleadingly. Finally, he shrugged.

"All right, children," he said, patronizingly. "What difference does it make, after all? A lifetime of certain boredom or a brief struggle for a dream that must end in certain death for all of you. Condemn me to boredom if you will." He smiled mockingly at them. "I congratulate you!" he said, lifting his glass. "It is not every day that one may die for a heroic cause!"

Ron broke, at last. He threw himself on Krylorno, terrified.

"Take my place!" he exclaimed. "Go with Yldra! She's going to take the others to my unit, where Nad will contact them. Take my place!" he cried. "I don't want to go! I'm innocent! I want no part of it!"

Krylorno cocked an eyebrow at him in theatrical disdain, and Yldra scowled for the first time since anyone could remember .

"Ron," she said, icily, "you had better hope Nad did not hear you over the sonophone. He would kill you. Remember his warning. It is evident your words to me of love and devotion were false, or you would want to be with me."

Ron broke down completely. He sat at a table and buried his head in his arms.

"I do love you, Yldra," he sobbed, "but I'm a coward. I can't help being what I am!"

Yldra made a sign to several of the young men beside her, and they moved to obey. They picked Ron up bodily and carried him. He screamed, once, and they knocked him senseless.

Left alone, Krylorno bathed his internal wounds with alcohol. The drunker he became, the more distorted was his reasoning, until he was filled with bitter resentment.

"Leave me out, will they?" he said, staggering to his feet. "Ha! I'll teach them not to slight Krylorno!"

Bottle in hand, he staggered in the general direction of section N, to find a Navigator.

BY this time, Yiddir was busy leading various groups of recruits through maintenance hatches and guiding them to a safe rendezvous between the walls. He became very apprehensive as Nad's quota failed to appear, however. Suspecting that something was wrong, he deputized certain young men to guard the others and keep them quiet, and then he moved swiftly to take in Nad's groups.

When at last he came to Yldra's group, he questioned them, through the visiplate, concerning Nad. When he learned that the latter had gone searching for Lylwani in section N, a shadow of grave disappointment fell across his aged countenance.

"We cannot wait," he said. "All of you enter the first apartment of this unit, quickly!"

"But this is a bachelor's unit!" protested one of the girls.

"Forget all the laws the Naviga-

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tors ever taught you, if you value your life," said Yiddir. "Go quickly!"

Yiddir led the last of the recruits through a maintenance hatch. Just as he was fastening it behind him, however, the whole ark began to resound with alarm bells.

"What is that?" Yldra asked him, close by his shoulder.

Yiddir's old hands trembled as he tightened the last bolt. "Perhaps our plan has been discovered," he said. "Listen!"

The sonophones were raising a bedlam. *"All guard units report immediately to T.H.Q."* came the announcement.

"T.H.Q. means Technical Headquarters," said Yiddir. "And only Technical knows anything about this area of the ship we are in. I think they are after us. We must move immediately to the life boat lockers. Follow me!"

"But Nad— and Lylwani!" protested Yldra.

"Casualties," said Yiddir, coldly. "Forget them or you'll all be caught. There is too much at stake now. Come on, quickly, all of you!"

NAD did not try to excuse himself for disobeying Yiddir's admonition to subordinate personal resires to the welfare of the majority. When it came to leaving Lylwani in Sargon's clutches—forever, never to see her again— hs rationalizations ceased and instinct took over. In a blind, reckless rage, he sought Sargon out.

By following the catwalks forward, he soon reached section N, and at his first opportunity he began unfastening one of the now familiar. safety hatches. Yiddir had armed him with both an M-Ray and a Disruptor. In the mood he was in, he was prepared to M-Ray all Navigators into a state of complete idiocy, or blast the whole section to atoms, if necessary.

When he came through the hatch he fixed it so that it was unfastened while appearing not to have been disturbed. This would be his exit, he hoped.

He found himself in a vault-like room that was a maze of instruments, some whirring and ticking, others flickering with kaleidoscope colors. Quickly, he tried the door of the chamber and found it could only be opened from the outside. So he blasted it with the Disruptor.

Once outside, he found himself in a shining corridor, face to face with a young Navigator who was paralyzed with shock. Evidently, nothing of this nature had ever occurred in his lifetime. To see an armed Passenger come blasting his way out of the recording vault was too much for him.

By the time he had recovered, he found himself covered with a hot-barreled Disruptor, and he was looking into a pair of cold gray eyes that said simply: *Obey or die!*

"Take me to Sargon," said Nad. "No questions. Quick!" He jabbed the Navigator and the latter moved without saying a word.

Two more Navigators turned into

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the corridor ahead of them. They were armed guards, Sargon's own men. In spite of their surprise, they raised their Stun Rays almost simultaneously.

But Nad's M-Ray was on them, and their weapons lowered suddenly to dangle ludicrously from their fingertips. They grinned idiotically as Nad and the now fully terrified Navigator passed them. Nad acquired one of the Navigators' Stun Rays and thrust it into his belt.

"I'm your man," the Navigator with him whispered. "Just don't M-Ray me! I swear I won't double cross you!"

"Shut up and keep moving—fast!" Nad hissed. "How much farther is it?"

"Here!" The Navigator pointed to a large metal door on Nad's right.

Whereupon Nad extracted the Stun Ray from his belt. "This won't hurt," he whispered. The other slumped quietly to the floor, blissfully unconscious.

Nad tried Sargon's door and found it to be unlocked. Then he flung it open and sprang into the middle of the room.

The first thing he focused his eyes on was Lylwani, herself, sitting up in her cushioned chair as though paralyzed with amazement. Obviously she had been crying, for her usually clear green eyes were bloodshot and their lids were swollen.

Now her eyes widened and an incredulous cry rose to her lips, but Nad instantly signalled her to be quiet. He turned and dragged into the room the inert body of the Navigator he had stunned, and he closed the door behind him. Then he beckoned Lylwani to him.

She sprang to her feet and came into his arms, trembling on the edge of hysteria. "My darling!" she whispered. "You're safe! You're safe!"

"Far from it," he said. "We've got to get out of here. Where's Sargon?"

"I don't know. He told me you had killed yourself, so I gave up all hope of ever—"

"Never mind, honey. Let's go!"

Then he stopped in his tracks as alarm bells started ringing everywhere. The sonophone in the room boomed a torrent of excited orders.

"Come on!" he said, opening the door to the corridor. But when he looked out he knew his way was blocked. The corridor was filled with running guards.

"Oh Nad!" cried Lylwani. "What can we do now!"

"Plenty," he said, locking the door from inside. "Follow me!"

He took her by the hand and led her into an inner compartment which composed Sargon's private quarters. Unfortunately he did not find the usual maintenance hatch.

The two looked at each other. The din raised by the alarms, the bellowing of the sonophones and the sound of many running feet began to increase the beating of their pulses, and terror found a grip on their hearts.

Just then, guards outside in the corridor began to pound on Sargon's

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office door.

Lylwani clutched at Nad's arms and pressed her head tightly against his chest. "You tried, darling," she said. "It's all right. We'll go out together!"

"That's right," he said, grimly. "We'll go out together. Get behind me!"

When she stepped wonderingly behind him, he focused his Disruptor on the wall of the apartment. There was a white flash accompanied by an explosion, and Lylwani saw a ragged hole leading into unknown darkness.

"What is it?" she whispered in awe. "The Abyss?"

"No. It is the road to the Abyss —and freedom. Follow me!"

Soon it became apparent that Navigators had entered between the walls, because he could hear them shouting, and their voices echoed and reechoed eerily through the dark and narrow labyrinths. Far ahead of him, Nad heard a series of startled shouts and screams.

"They've found them!" he muttered. "They're fighting — probably being M-Rayed! Come on, quickly, or we're lost forever!"

At that precise moment, a booted foot kicked Nad's light out of his hand and darkness engulfed him. At the same time, he felt his M-Ray being snatched out of his grip.

Viciously, he sprayed the whole area in front of him and to each side with Stun Ray, and silence filled in the darkness to completion. Aside from dim and distant sounds of fighting, he could only hear Lylwani's frightened breathing and his own. He felt the walls on either side of him and found them to be of a strange, warm substance that he had felt once before when Yiddir first guided him between the walls.

Suddenly, from above his head a voice said, "I have this M-Ray focused on both of you. Don't move!"

As the two looked up into the apathetic glare of Nad's own flashlight, they did not have to see who was there above it in the darkness. The voice was that of Sargon.

Nad swiftly analyzed his predicament. He and Llywani stood on a narrow catwalk between the walls. Below them was a black pit of emptiness. Above, somewhere deadly close, crouched Sargon. And far away somewhere Yiddir and the recruits struggled with the Navigators.

Whatever was to be done had to be done instantly or the whole cause was lost. But Sargon had an M-Ray focused on him, and there came to Nad's mind all too clearly the full evaluation of his danger in regard to that weapon.

If Sargon activated it, Nad and perhaps Lylwani also would lose all memory of life, their purpose, their hopes and plans, their love for each other, their conditionings, their personalities — their very identity. A wave of real terror engulfed him, but he fought it, strengthened at last by one element in his blood and marrow that was unfailing—his hatred of Sargon.

"In my hand," he said quietly to

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Sargon, "I hold a Disruptor. I believe you know better than I do whether or not there is an instant of awareness before the mind succumbs to the M-Ray. In that instant, if you use it on me, I will blast you into extinction, as well as a good portion of the ship."

There was a tantalizing silence, except that Nad heard Sargon breathing tensely above him. He also felt Lylwani's tightened grip on his arm.

"Lylwani," he said, divining Sargon's thoughts, "if you feel the M-Ray, grip my arm as hard as you can."

Sargon said, "You also have some reason for not using your weapons."

"Yes," Nad replied, every sense tingling with alertness. "The Stun Ray might miss." He realized that the action of using the Stun Ray might allow the brief instant of awareness of the M-Ray to come and pass, leaving him helpless. "Furthermore," he said, "we are standing between two reactor shields." Yiddir had tried to explain what lay behind these weird shields, but all Nad had understood was that something of monstrous power lay harnessed there. "You can appreciate better than I," he said to Sargon, "what would happen if the Disruptor were to penetrate these shields."

"It would blow this whole ark to blazes," said Sargon coldly.

"Then don't force me to use it in this spot," countered Nad. "Drop that M-Ray and get out of here!"

There was another moment of intense silence, while Nad nervously fingered his Stun Ray and Lylwani still gripped him with a feverish tenacity. Sweat trickled around the trigger finger of Nad's other hand, where it rested on the Disruptor release. The roaring of his pulse drowned out the more distant sounds of alarm and fighting. He marveled, in spite of his predicament, at the degree of tenseness to which the mind could be brought without breaking down.

Finally, slowly and calmly, Sargon spoke. "It's Lylwani I want," he said. "I'll take every risk you will, so listen to this, if you want to help your friends down there, leave Lylwani here and go. If you don't like that proposition—"

There was no more room for words.

Nad fired the Stun Ray upward as rapidly as his hand could work, but in the same moment he yelled as Lylwani's fingernails tore his flesh. Simultaneously, Sargon's heavy body thumped unconscious onto the catwalk.

Nad placed his weapons in his belt and reached down with hungry hands to find the other's throat. But he was too late to prevent the body from slipping off the catwalk into nothingness.

"Lylwani!" he called. Groping behind him, he found her and clutched her to him, kissing her face and lips. "You're safe! We'll make it yet!"

Then his flesh crept and he felt his hair bristling. For Lylwani only giggled at him and made nameless sounds in reply . . .

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NAD could never quite remember how he found his way to the lifeboat lockers, even though Yiddir had already shown him the way.

Vaguely, he recalled interminable periods of balancing precariously on dark catwalks with Lylwani in his arms, or of hiding while Navigators led the poor recruits back into captivity, passing him close by, with lights, so that he could see the victims' idiotic smiles. They had all been M-Rayed like his beloved Lylwani. The whole plan was at an end, he had thought dimly.

Except for himself and Lylwani. He had an irrational desire to risk it in one of the space boats alone with her, somehow to master the secret of the controls and in spite of having no knowledge of astronomy whatsoever to find that little lost world of which Yiddir had told him. There he would reeducate his sweetheart and they would live and reproduce their own kind.

With these dim, mad thoughts and with Lylwani lying childlike in his arms, he arrived at the lockers. There he saw lights and Navigator guards, a squad of ten of them who had made one fatal mistake, Nad perceived. They were all gathered together in one small group.

Suddenly, his reason became twisted between insupportable grief and a reckless thirst for revenge. He set Lylwani down and deliberately aimed his Disruptor at the guards, firing without warning.

There followed a quick succession of blinding flashes and deafening explosions. Not only the guards went into nothingness, but several space-boats, as well, along with part of the metal floor. Fortunately, the great cryosite doors separating the lockers from the Abyss held, although the inner sections of the two airlocks were destroyed.

He stood there, wondering if he were going to vomit. Behind him, Lylwani laughed and clapped her hands gaily at the fireworks and the smouldering results. Nad did not look back at her. He stood alone in the broken desolation of the place, trying to swallow a lump in his throat that threatened to choke him.

Then, suddenly, he felt a friendly hand on his arm and a voice said. "Follow us quickly." It was Yiddir.

Nad's mind was reeling from the impact of events too terrible and swift to assimilate. He heard Yldra's voice crying out in the darkness behind him as she discovered Lylwani's plight, and there were a few other male voices, but he cared not whether they were of friend or foe, of sane man or idiot. He followed blindly ...

THERE were other space boats and launching locks that were still intact, although one thing bothered Yiddir that he refrained from mentioning to the others. He observed a very curious thing about one of the launching locks, but paused there for only a brief moment. Then, grimly, he led his pitifully small party onward. There was no time for conversation. The Navigators would be back in a matter of moments.

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The dark ship lay enigmatically in its lock—a question mark standing between precarious Today and a totally unknown *Tomorrow*. Success? Failure? Privation, recapture, endless wandering through blackness and into madness? Sudden, violent, merciful death? All these questions were equally unanswerable as they filed silently on board and Yiddir turned to the control room.

No one was curious about the interior of this ark of freedom for which they had fought and for which scores of their companions had sacrificed their personalities. To them it was shelter. They tied themselves into cushioned seats as Yiddir instructed them to do—and they waited.

Yiddir had not wasted his thirty years of hidden exile. He had studied all controls and every phase of maintenance with painstaking care, and now he knew more about these space boats than the best Navigator on board the mother vessel. Expertly, he activated the lock and caused the outer doors to slide open, exposing the lifeboat to the awful gulf of blackness outside. For one brief moment his hand paused on the control. For centuries, his kind had been bottled up in darkness, except for sporadic, half-forgotten intervals. He felt suddenly the weight of Man's loneliness, lost as they all were in the far reaches of the unknown galaxy. He knew that this single lifeboat, once detached from its base, would be like an electron lost in the farthest depths of the Seventh Sea.

With an unaccustomed prayer on his lips, he launched the boat outward into the great darkness . . .

THEIR little group consisted of seven. There were Yiddir, Nad, Ron, Yldra, Lylwani, Gorn and Karg. Gorn was a pale, blue-haired Venusian like Yldra. Karg was one of Lylwani's race—a Martian. Gorn had been wounded by a bad fall from one of the catwalks. Two ribs had punctured his left lung and he was dying from a pulmonary hemorrhage.

He was bitterly contemptuous of Ron. Just before he died, on that first day out, he called everybody around him and addressed Ron in their presence. In his dimming eyes they could see most of those qualities which they needed so desperately for their venture—courage, strength, and a full awareness of the role they were all acting in the destiny of their kind.

"Ron," he haid, laboriously, "I want you to witness my death and realize what it means. This expedition could well be the only chance for survival of the human race. Of course, you may all die and one or both branches of the fleet may succeed. But it's just as possible that the reverse may happen. Here there is no room for a coward!" His emphasis on this last phrase cost him a new pain and he almost fainted. "I want you to realize that your outburst to Krylorno was directly responsible for the failure of the others to reach this ship. Thanks to you, about eighty-five recruits, young men and women, have been deprived of their memories just like Lylwani

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here. If this thought haunts you through the days or years ahead as you seek a new world, I hope it serves to cure you of your cowardice. My death is also your fault, Ron. So you are responsible for taking my place in this party." His eyes closed and his whole body tensed. "Take over—Ron!"

These were his last words.

As Yiddir decelerated as much as he could within the limits of reasonable comfort, the invisible mother ship and the rest of the rebel fleet receded at the rate of millions of kilometers each minute; in an opposite direction the distant Government Fleet still flung its light years long phalanx into ever expanding vastness; and he and his handful of lost souls were totally detached from all things kindred. They were like the first seeds of life in the Beginning, or like the last dust of the ages settling in the sunset of Creation. Whether colossal Nature would be mother or nemesis to them was a question that would remain unanswered through long months or even years to come. Yiddir was without hope, because of their small number, but where hope ran out, life continued. Almost like a robot, he went forward with the plan. He decelerated, day after day and week after week, calculating that their velocity would be reduced to that of the speed of light within two months. Then, for the first time in years, he would see the stars. It would be the first glimpse for the rest on board, and he wondered if that over-whelming spectacle would inspire them, or depress them with a sense of utter futility.

Then, too, there was that strange mystery concerning the lifeboat locker. After he had brooded on it for days, he finally called Nad to his side.

"What happened to Sargon?" he asked him, without preamble. "You said you overcame him in a struggle, during which he M-Rayed Lylwani. But what are the details? How did you overcome him?"

Mention of Sargon never failed to key Nad's faculties to a maximum of alertness. He quickly perceived that Yiddir was driving at something.

"Why?" he asked, his gray eyes meeting Yiddir's steadily. "I got him with a Stun Ray and he fell off the catwalk."

Yiddir stared back intently. "How far did he fall?"

"I don't know. It was dark. Why do you ask?"

"The effects of the Stun Ray only last a few minutes, depending on the intensity for which the weapon is set. It may be—"

He paused, thinking. Then he asked, "Did Sargon really care a great deal about Lylwani?"

"He told me he would take every risk I would to get her."

"Hm-m-m. That might be the motive. He certainly wouldn't take such a risk in the line of mere duty, or even for revenge alone. But if Lylwani means as much to him as she does to you— Tell me this. Did he know she was M-Rayed?"

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"No. But what are you driving at?"

Yiddir spoke very slowly. "The spaceboat locker next to ours was empty," he said, "yet only six hours before our departure I *know* there was a ship sitting in it. That can only mean that very shortly before we left another ship also came out. It may be out here somewhere right now, trailing us."

Nad's excitement subsided slightly. "Sargon could have recovered in time to get to the lockers ahead of us," he said. "And he could have gone out into the Abyss to trap us in case we escaped. But in that case he would have spotted us immediately on his instruments and struck long before this. His stake in the rebellion is too important to be abandoned, I think, even for Lylwani."

"That is an admirable deduction," said Yiddir. "But perhaps he might know how to take Lylwani and return to the rebel fleet as well."

"What! Return to the fleet from here? There *is* no return!"

"Yes," said Yiddir. "I have never told you, and you must never tell the others, but there is a way. Our drivers can be altered for more speed. It is possible to overtake the fleet, although as the distance increases the time factor increases proportionately. Sargon is a capable Navigator and I know he finished Technical in order to increase his rating. He would know how to convert the drivers. Higher velocities haven't been resorted to, in general, because the occasional meteors getting through our detection screens would have dangerous mass, enough to penetrate cryosite walls.

"But — why should Sargon wait this long to strike?"

"I don't know. Maybe a new factor has been added that delayed him. A breakdown, or some accident."

"But all that is pure supposition. Haven't you some sort of detector on board? Can't you tell if he is out here?"

"Within ten million kilometers or so, yes. Much much time has elapsed, and distances are tremendous out here. He could be on our trail without our knowing it."

"But if we couldn't detect him, how could he detect us in this darkness?"

"The answer to that is simpler than you think," said Yiddir. "You forget that he knows where we are going."

Nad's brows raised and his mouth parted. "How could he?" he asked. "I'll admit he'd know all about the world we're trying to reach, but why should he assume *we* know about it?"

Yiddir shrugged. "I don't know how much Yldra said in front of Krylorno or how much Krylorno told the Navigators. But one thing is certain. No Passenger could handle this ship as I have. It takes technical training which, incidentally, I am going to have to give to you and Ron and Karg as soon as possible. The Navigators have always speculated on my escape and that of my

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son, years ago. They have always feared that perhaps one of us would return, either alone or in force. Krylorno's tale would easily enable them to guess what happened. They knew at once that I was on board. Well, that may be one thing that has made Sargon cautious, if he has followed us. He knows, perhaps, that he not only has another full-fledged Navigator to deal with, but the former captain of the ark— and a man of legendary scientific ability, in fact, the inventor of the M-Ray. The more I think of it, the more it all seems to fit together. That missing lifeboat in the locker next to ours cannot be disregarded."

Nad sat silently for a long time, gazing with narrowed eyes into space. "What could he do if he decided to take us?" he asked, finally.

"Our meteor detectors would give us warning. We have shields against all primary rays and the Disruptor cannons which the rebels have mounted in all these boats. I doubt if he knows enough about second order stuff to assemble an effective M-Ray projector, which he would have to have, because the hand M-Ray is only good at short range. I have no shield against a good M-Ray projector. Only my son knew that secret, and he is long since gone."

"Then what can Sargon do?"

"I don't know. That may be why he's holding back—perhaps trying to figure something out. Perhaps—"

"What?"

"Perhaps he would even go so far as to follow us to that little planet of ours and kidnap Lylwani when the opportunity presented itself."

Nad got to his feet. "I think we're both dreaming," he said. "Why don't you start teaching me what you know about this ship?"

Yiddir sat still, thinking for a long time. Then he looked up and asked, "What do you want first, instruction in piloting—or in the use of the armaments?"

As he looked steadily at Nad, the latter broke into a grim smile. "Okay," Nad said. "Then we're *not* dreaming. Let me see those Disruptor cannons . . . "

DECELERATION continued, unabated, and the passengers of the small ship walked in it with heavy and laborious tread. The darkness prevailed, day after day, and each sought to occupy himself to the best of his abilities. Yiddir carefully instructed Nad, Karg and Ron concerning all the controls on board. He even started on a long-range conversion job, working on one of their four drivers at a time. He hoped to utilize the increased velocity some day in their further search for the better solar system whose existence he suspected.

Yldra had been assigned the long, arduous task of reeducating Lylwani. She had to teach her to speak and even how to eat and walk properly. It was a heartbreaking task, but Nad was always there, encouraging her in the depths of each new

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discouragement.

Karg was indirectly helpful. The short-statured little Martian was naturally cheerful in spite of the discomforture of doubled gravity due to deceleration. He was interested in everything, quick to learn, and entertaining. But most valuable of all, from the psychological standpoint, he had brought along one precious belonging that was now a means of mental salvation. It was a Martian *querla,* a small musical instrument that generated invisible rays in which his moving fingers produced a marvelous music of rich tone and endless variety. Yldra had a very pleasing voice, and sometimes the two would entertain the others by playing and singing.

At such times, Lylwani was very receptive and cooperative, and she even repeated some of Yldra's songs, to Nad's infinite delight. All these things served to establish a routine and way of life for the ship's small company which provided a certain measure of stability.

But one day—tragedy struck . . .

ON the upper deck, astern, was an observation chamber equipped with a huge, double-paned window of transparent metal. While they were in the darkness, there was nothing to be seen from this vantage point, but Yiddir had announced that their velocity was being reduced very closely to the speed of light, and that any time now they might begin to see some evidence of the bright universe that had surrounded them invisibly all of their lives.

Ron had been sitting with Yldra in this room, both of them watching the window for some break in the darkness that lay astern. They had spoken of many things, their old acquaintances left behind, and of the possibilities of their future life on the new world.

Suddenly, the sonophone in their chamber brought Nad's voice to them. He reminded Yldra that it was her watch with Lylwani, and she got up to leave.

"I'll stay here a while," Ron told her.

The chamber just forward of the aft observation bridge had been converted into a battle station by the rebel Navigators. Here were mounted several Disruptor cannons. Just as Yldra stepped into this room on her way forward, the galactite struck.

Started on its journey eons past, the small metallic fragment had gathered much more velocity than a meteor. Meteors were local phenomena, occurring within the galaxy, but the galactite was much rarer owing to its extra-galactic origin. In the course of time required for its transit between galaxies, it had acquired a velocity greater than light, itself. The arks of the fleet and the lifeboats could detect the approach of ordinary meteors and automatically vary their courses slightly to avoid them in time, or if a meteor penetrated the detection area and struck, the cryosite hulls could withstand the blow. But no detectors or metal walls could stop a galactite because of its

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terrible velocity.

The galactite struck the ship and penetrated it like a hot knife passing through butter. In its path it left a series of small, neat, round holes on both sides of the hull and through two decks of cryosite. Its passage was accompanied by a deafening report, which stunned Yldra momentarily.

Then air began to rush out of the chamber she was in. She began to struggle with the forward hatch, but it was jammed as the result of the galactite's titanic blow. She turned aft, but too late, because the observation hatch slid automatically into place, as it had been designed to operate just that way in such an emergency.

Its seal could be released, however, from Ron's side, and she called to him frantically to help her. When half the air had been released from the room, an unexpected phenomenon occurred that gave promise of saving her, even as she slipped into unconscious. The moisture in the air, as it encountered the deep cold of outer space, froze instantly, and soon the galactite holes in the hull were obstructed with ice, which slowed the escape of air. There was still a chance.

Over the sonophone, Yiddir's tense instructions penetrated Ron's panic. "The air in Yldra's chamber is leaking out very slowly," he said. "Open your hatch and pull Yldra through. Then close it again. This will reduce your own air pressure considerably and you may pass out, but you'll be safe. We are putting on space suits on this side and will burn our way through this jammed hatch, repair the damage and then pull you out. Now act quickly, or Yldra is lost!"

There was no answer from Ron.

"Hurry!" Yiddir exclaimed. "We can't burn through from here without causing the ice plug to melt in the hole, and without a space suit, Yldra would die—just like Gradon did in the execution chamber."

"Ron!" came Nad's voice.

Then Ron: "I—I can't! The air will go out. I'll die!"

"Then die, you coward! If I find you alive and Yldra dead I'll kill you anyway!"

But Ron only fell in his chair and sobbed. "Kill me then!" he cried. "I can't do it! I love her, but I—I can't make myself do it!"

Nad and Yiddir were in space suits in the next chamber forward. Their forward hatch was sealed. Instead of using the heat gun, Nad blasted the hatch with a Disruptor and leaped into the room. But the ice plug cracked, and the air rushed out again. Before new ice could form, Yldra's nose and ears flowed red.

The two men carried her out to safety. Between them and Ron were two airless chambers.

Time passed endlessly for Ron, but nothing more happened. Finally, he addressed the sonophone in a choking voice.

"Nad!" he called. "Have you got her? Is she all right?"

After a long, terrible silence, Nad replied. "You don't know, do you?"

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he said. "Two airless rooms separate you from us, Ron. If you try to come out, you'll die. If you stay there, you'll suffocate in a few hours. Just stay there and think about it!"

"Nad!" Ron called, frantically. "Tell me! Is she alive?"

"Your cowardice wrecked our plans before," came Nad's voice, murderously cold. *"Now what have you done to Yldra?"*

"Nad!" Ron was hysterical, crying out in falsetto. "Don't leave me here! Nad!"

But only silence answered him . . .

YLDRA died. Fortunately, Lylwani was spared the grief of the others, but Yiddir, Nad and Karg could only sit there in painful silence looking at her lovely form as it lay inert before them. All but Yiddir, perhaps, hoped that Ron would die in agony.

Silently, they prepared her for space burial, and just before they put her in the disposal lock, Nad bent over and kissed her cold forehead.

"Goodbye, sweet," he whispered, tenderly.

Ron, in a delirium of fright and mortal anguish, seemed to hear a distant voice chanting:

Oh Darkness that is Light!
Oh mighty judge that offers peace
forever in abyssmal night!
Oh Truth that gives me naked
Nothing for falsely vested life,
Where in an instant that is ever
I may be free of Wrong or Right!

"Yldra!" he screamed. *"Yldra!"*

Silence brought loneliness to sit with his conscience, while the air about him grew stale . . .

YIDDIR finally prevailed upon Nad to rescue Ron. At first, Nad refused, with close-mouthed stubbornness, but when Karg offered to get in a space suit, Nad gave in.

They used one compartment for an air lock, and Nad went into the damaged chamber and repaired the holes. Then air was admitted and they announced to Ron over the sonophones that he could come out.

After almost a minute, the hatch opened, and Ron stood there looking blankly at his brother.

"Yldra is dead and buried in space," said Nad. "You didn't deserve to see her. If you care to live with yourself after this, I'm giving you your life back. Not that I can see why. You can thank Yiddir."

Ron's face was colorless, his eyes severely bloodshot, but the fear was gone out of him. In fact, the spirit had gone out of him.

They left him to his own resources for a while, but later on when it was necessary for him to speak, they found that he could not articulate. As though unseeing, he stared mutely through them. He ate and slept like a somnambulist.

"The shock may wear off in time," said Yiddir, sympathetically. "Nad, both you and Karg may despise Ron, but I feel terribly sorry for him. No man could experience a greater hell than to be born a coward and want to die and yet not

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have the courage to commit suicide. I know that Ron despises himself more, perhaps, than both of you put together. He is experiencing more punishment than anyone could possibly administer to him externally. Whether you may think so or not, I believe he loved Yldra as much as any man can love a woman, but the mechanism of cowardice worked in him in a way that was uncontrollable. Just leave him alone and give time a chance to heal his mind and shattered nerves."

After a long moment of silence in which neither Nad nor Karg could think of anything to say, Yiddir added, "We have more important things to worry about. That galactite damaged certain electrical circuits that are virtually inaccessible to us. Our meteor detection system works only intermittently. It can only be hoped that no meteors cross our path while the system is not functioning. Of course, the hull might withstand the blow, but the change of course might be violent and the inertia would most certainly kill us at this velocity. Just now the system is functioning again. I hope it continues to do so."

Yiddir looked significantly at Nad and felt that he was thinking of the same thing. If a meteor could get through without detection at some future date, so could Sargon.

THE great event they had been waiting for finally occurred. It happened one day when Nad was on watch and while Karg and Ron and Yiddir slept.

He was in the control room alone with Lylwani. Before him were control panels, and above these were large observation ports. There was nothing to do but watch the deceleration indicators occasionally.

Lylwani sat close beside Nad, looking blissfully at the black observation ports. Nad had been watching her affectionately. She appeared to be in good health, and the loneliness in him transformed her natural beauty into irresistible allure. He could not resist taking her hand in his, and she did not object. In fact he was elated to feel the suggestion of a responsive pressure from her slender fingers.

She could converse and think for herself with a childlike simplicity, so Nad tried to engage her in conversation.

"You and I," he said, "are the last of our kind." There was no point in telling her of the arks, he thought.

"There is Yiddir," she replied, "and Karg, and Ron."

"I know, dearest, but—" He stopped, helplessly. How could he explain to an infant mind the pricelessness of their still extant ability to procreate their kind? How could he tell her that they were the potential parents of a new humanity?

"But what?" she asked, looking at him with the sweet, trusting smile of a child.

In her mind, he thought, she is a child, but physically she is a woman. She is *my* woman! He took her head between his hands, very

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gently, so as not to startle her.

"I must teach you to love me again," he said, "or I'll lose my mind."

"Love?" She raised her brows, quizzically.

"Yes," he said. "Love, Lylwani! A very important thing. Do you understand what it is to be happy?"

"I am happy."

"But I mean—happier."

"Very happy?"

"That's right, darling. When you love, you are very happy."

"I am very happy. Am I in love?"

A wave of discouragement sought to engulf him, but he persisted stubbornly.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked her, and then he kissed her gently while his arms ached to hold her.

She did not resist or respond, but he felt a slight tremor pass through her. Her eyes were wide, puzzled.

"Kiss?" she said.

"Kiss of love," he corrected. "Makes us both very happy. I love you, Lylwani. Do you love me?"

"Kiss," she said, raising her lips to his.

Nad swept her into his arms and kissed her as he had wanted to kiss her ever since they had left the ark, and she responded happily.

"You're mine, Lylwani! Mine!" he whispered.

"Mine," she answered, and her arms stole around his neck. "I am very happy."

WHEN Nad next looked up, something bothered him that he could not define. He started to turn back to Lylwani, but his attention was dragged back again to something—something that was not as it should be.

Then he saw, through the observation panel, several dim glimmerings of violet light. Lylwani felt his body tense and she arose from his arms.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

Now Nad's cup was overflowing. A fierce, glad joy suffused him. "Look!" he cried, pointing at the lights. "The stars, Lylwani! *The stars!*"

"Stars?" She looked up in puzzlement at the lights. "I see lights —pretty lights."

"Oh don't worry about what they are sweetheart!" he exclaimed. "They just make me very happy."

She frowned. "Happy? Do you love the stars?"

"I could kiss them!"

"I don't understand," she said. "Everything is love and kisses."

Nad laughed and hugged her. "Come on!" he said. "Let's wake up the others and show them the stars!"

Yiddir and Karg came rushing forward when he called them, but Ron did not respond and they left him alone.

"Yes, there they are at last!" cried Yiddir, his old face flushed with the emotion of relief.

"Is that all they amount to?" queried Karg disappointedly. "I can see only about ten violet points of light."

"No!" Yiddir laughed. "You see only the beginning of them. We have

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to slow down still more. We see only a few that are moving away from us, and their lightwaves are still reaching us at such a high frequency that we can only discern the highest visible band of their spectra. That is the so-called Doppler effect. In a few hours you will see the blazing glory of God's whole universe!"

"Ths is a very happy occasion," said Karg.

"Are you happy?" Lylwani asked him.

"Yes," Karg answered. "Very happy."

To everyone's intense surprise, Lylwani kissed him. "The kiss of love will make you happier," she explained.

Karg blushed crimson and looked at Nad, who was utterly crestfallen. But the Martian's sense of humour saved the situation as he admonished Nad with mock severity.

"Teacher," he said, "you'll have to make your lessons more explicit!"

It was Nad's turn to blush. Both Yiddir and Karg patted him on the back with silent eloquence. They understood his problem.

"As soon as visibility has been completely established," Yiddir announced, in an effort to change the subject, "we're going to have a lot of work to do. I've got to locate definitely the solar system where our little planet is. It will be several weeks yet before we will be stationary and can start acceleration back toward our goal. Our trip to the planet will have to be made as much as possible within the speed of light, so it may take us a long time to reach it. Just how long I'll have to determine. If it is too many light years distant we'll have to plunge again into the velocity of darkness, but I hope not."

Yiddir thought of Ron. He reasoned that if Ron was mentally incapable of evaluating their present position it were a blessing. For otherwise his first thought must be, as was Yiddir's: Poor Yldra died before she got to see the stars . . .

TRUE to Yiddir's prediction, within a few hours the majority of the stars shifted into full spectrum visibility and shone with their natural light, at least to an effective extent. There was a slight tendency for the stars ahead to be predominantly blue-white and the ones astern to be predominantly yellow-white or even dull red, but Yiddir promised that within a week or so everything would be absolutely normal.

As the flaming universe took form before their eyes, they felt a great oppressiveness lift from them. Their spirits found room for expansion and life took on new values.

Ahead of them, in the direction of their goal, was a tremendous spectacle that none of them would ever forget. Towering in awe-inspiring grandeur among the great, blazing tiers and banks of stars was an opaque mass of gas that Yiddir said was hundreds of millions of kilometers in extent. He called it a nebula.

"Our little planet lies close be-

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side it," he said, and he showed them a yellowish sun in the telescope that was the center of the system they sought. "The outer fringe of the dark nebula is at about the same distance as our planet," he explained. "It is about three light years away, so I am afraid we'll have to make a large part of our journey in the darkness of higher velocity, but it will be necessary to watch our course and not get too close to the nebula."

"Why?" asked Karg, who was at the telescope.

A shadow of concern crossed momentarily over Yiddir's wrinkled brow. "I became informed, some time ago, of certain unaccountable phenomena connected with that region," he said. "Exploration reports are on file in the ark we have left, and I found the opportunity to peruse some of them secretly. At the time the rebel Navigators visited the little world we are seeking, several of the scout boats, such as this one, made excursions to the nebula, itself, to gather samples of the gas for analysis. Their pilots and accompanying observers returned with accounts of strange physical phenomena occurring within the nebula. There were planes of strong gravitational currents separated by regions of no attraction whatsoever. One of the ships was almost lost in a powerful eddy for which they had no name but which I would call a space warp. My only theory on this subject is that the nebula is so huge and its gasses so dense that various regions of superior density have enough concentrated mass to set up strong gravitational fields. As these masses exert pressure, expand, contract or attract each other they cause motion, as well, and probably a very complicated series of orbits is set up for multitudinous masses of gas, which change and change again. The result is that probably all the freak laws of Nature occur there, and it would be dangerous for a ship to go too near to the nebula or to attempt to pass through it. That's why I want as much visual flight as I can get enroute to the planet, because in the darkness of super velocity I could go off course and end up too close to that dark colossus."

Karg had been wandering among the star clusters with the telescope as Yiddir spoke. Now he turned and asked a question that brought Nad sharply to attention.

"Yiddir," he said, "I was present when you first contacted us by sonophone, and I remember you told us that Man had a magnificent purpose to accomplish in the living flesh. You said this purpose had been hidden from us by the Navigators who had robbed us of memory, and that you could not reveal it to us until we had learned many more facts. Is it the proper time now to ask you what that purpose is?"

At this point, Yiddir, alone, noticed that Ron focused his eyes on him, and that there glimmered in him the faintest spark of interest for the first time since Yldra's death.

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"The answer to your question," he said, "is a very vital one, but also the most problematical one that may be asked. I can't answer you in one neat sentence. In fact, it may take me days, months, or even years to get the idea across to you, but if you'll be patient I'll start."

He then began to approach the subject of Man's duality, amazing them all with the concept of life beyond the flesh.

"Centuries and millenia ago, all this was so incomprehensible," he continued, "that it was discussed on the basis of a blind and trusting faith. As science developed in its constant search for the truth, certain things could not very readily be reconciled with the old religious ideas and they were regarded merely as parables disguising, for a more ignorant mass of people, the real truths that science was after. So atheism developed, unfortunately, and Man retrogressed through rank materialism almost to the brink of sheer animalism, until the scientists, still valiantly searching, finally found the road to a seeing and a *knowing* faith in Man's duality, by *proving* it, and by basing the new approach to godliness on the *proof* that nothing was supernatural—that even the next plane of existence was as physical as this. The discovery of sub-matter and second order phenomena led to the actual detection and even, in some cases, photographs, of Man's sub-material self. Just as in the flesh we are formed in embryo and born into the corporeal plane of existence, so the sub-material, or ethereal Man, or *spirit,* as it was once called, is embryonic within the living human, until our grosser body disintegrates and releases the final entity of Man into the sub-material world which was once called Heaven, or the Hereafter, but which we know now is merely a vast universe composed of a finer matter."

"But the purpose of our present existence—what is that? asked Nad.

Yiddir smiled. "I could talk for years," he said, "but to make a long story short and go into the details later, I will tell you that there is one fundamental law behind all things, and failure to adhere to that law leads to disruption and unhappiness. That law says that there are two opposite forces—which may be called anything you like—active and passive, positive and negative, good and bad, construction and destruction. No matter where you look you find its manifestation: love and hate, man and woman, peace and war, happiness and despair. All is surge or vibration between these opposites. Without surge and striving between these extremes there would be no energy, hence no matter, or space, or time, or existence. *And as Man is finite, so by this law may we positively deduce the Infinite Man* — called God; not an arbitrary entity sitting somewhere on an ethereal throne, but the Incomprehensible Total of all sub-material energy, of which we are part and contributors."

"But still I don't see the great

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purpose of life," protested Karg.

"That purpose," said Yiddir, "is expansion, surge, or striving toward godliness, *from finite to Infinite!* No civilization that defies this principle of Natural Law can progress or stabilize itself at all!"

"But how can we progress toward this godliness?" asked Nad.

"We are doing it now," said Yiddir. "In our self-denial and sacrifice to safeguard a potential future generation which must spring from you and Lylwani, we have advanced just that much out of our finite selves. Concentration upon self, alone, is merely a process of densifying and becoming infinitesimal even to the point of spiritual extinction."

At this point, Ron buried his face in his hands. And Yiddir knew, at last, that he had driven his point home.

IT required another week finally to eliminate their forward velocity. Yiddir handled the controls so expertly that they were without induced gravity for only a few seconds. Then acceleration took the place of deceleration and they were on their way at last toward their distant goal.

In the meantime, Yiddir and Karg both took note of Nad's frequent use of the telescope. Instead of the expression of awe and wonderment that was always to be seen in Karg's face when he used the instrument, Nad's face reflected nothing but cold, grim determination. For hours, his narrowed, gray eyes searched the limitless vastness, and the other men knew he was not looking for new stars. At other times he watched the meteor detector, continually adjusting it for ultra-sensitivity, and yet they knew he was not trying to detect meteors. Then when the detection system failed momentarily owing to the intermittent short caused by the galactite, he would rush to the telescope and begin his vigil all over again.

Or at other times Nad would try to be alone with Lylwani, awakening her personality slowly and painstakingly to a more complete awareness of their situation. At last she was completely rational, requiring only the continued process of education and training to bring her back to her former self.

Ron, too, showed some slow signs of progress, although he was still inarticulate. Sometimes Yiddir found him, too, at the telescope, and he reflected that curiosity was a good sign of convalescence. He was even able to interest Ron in further training concerning space navigation.

Karg was all around handy man and dependable standby. He took complete charge of the converters and synthesized their food and water. Or at other times he would entertain them with his Martian *querla,* while Lylwani sang the songs he had taught her. Yiddir would sit silently meditating on the precarious future of a race of human beings that must originate from Nad and Lylwani — whom he considered in his mind as Adam and Eve.

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Such was their state of affairs when ultra-velocity was approaching again and Yiddir prepared to hurl them into the darkness that lies beyond the speed of light. They were two and a half light years from their goal.

As the stars began to fade slowly from view, Nad suddenly demanded a decrease of speed, for the sake of visibility. He had been at the telescope several hours.

"What's the matter?" Yiddir asked him, and Karg and Lylwani crowded close to see.

Nad's eye was at the eyepiece and he was silent for almost a minute.

"I lost it," he said finally.

"Lost what?" Karg asked him.

Nad straightened up, his face slightly drawn with fatigue, and he brushed a mop of blond hair back from his forehead. "It might have been a meteor," he said, "and yet its velocity seemed to be too great."

Yiddir's eyes narrowed. "In which direction was it traveling?"

Nad answered his look, significantly. "It was moving parallel to us and at about the same speed."

"How far away?"

Nad shrugged. "Who can tell? The detectors can't pick it up."

Karg addressed both Yiddir and Nad. "You think it could be —"

"Sargon?" said Nad. "I don't know."

"Who is Sargon?" asked Lylwani.

Nad looked at her with deep affection. He put his arm around her and drew her close to him.

"I hope you *never* find out," he said.

That day their little ship hurled into the great darkness, an infinitesimal mote dwarfed into virtual nothingness by the towering enigma of the dark nebula.

NAD could not sleep. He lay in his bunk wide awake and tried to remember how long they had been traveling in the darkness of super velocity. Days? Weeks? Such units of time were almost without meaning in this terrible endlessness, and there was a year or a year and a half to go. Sometimes he had felt that the whole structure of his personality was going to slump suddenly into a shapeless puddle, because all the reasons which formed the props under his mental stability were but arbitrary synthesis, like the food that came out of the converters. But in such precarious moments he supported himself on two pillars of reality: his love for Lylwani and his hatred and suspicion of Sargon. Against his fear that Sargon might really be out there trailing them swiftly through the darkness was balanced the grim *hope* that he was there—that someday they would meet again and that he could rid himself of his bitterness by throttling his enemy forever.

Abandoning his attempt to rest, he finally got up and went forward to keep Karg company in the control room. When he arrived, however, he found the room empty. He looked at the instruments and found

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them steady. However, the pilot light over the meteor indicator was out again, as it had been of late with dangerous frequency.

Reasoning that Karg had gone to the observation bridge aft, he sat down idly at Yiddir's chart desk and puzzled over the star charts. Then he got up again and paced the room, a frown creasing his brow. Why was he so nervous? He tried to analyze himself. It was not just boredom. What was it?

Then he stopped dead still, eyes slowly widening with nameless apprehension. *What was wrong?*

The whole ship was too silent. He was accustomed to stillness out here in the void, but this was an absence of sound that pricked up the ears of instinct.

Swiftly, he went aft to look for Karg. The rear observation chamber was empty. He went to Yiddir's cabin and found him unconscious in his bunk, but as he shook him Yiddir slowly came to.

"I can't sleep," Yiddir mumbled, "been awake for hours."

"But you were unconscious!" said Nad. "You look like you've been knocked out. No color in your face at all!"

"You're rather pale, yourself," Yiddir replied, looking up at him curiously.

"Yiddir, something is wrong. I can't find Karg anywhere!"

The old man got up and accompanied Nad on a hasty tour of inspection. At last they found Karg. He was lying on the floor before the main hatch airlock, face down, a Disruptor clutched in one hand. His black hair was matted with blood.

Silently, both men bent over him and made a quick examination. With a frenzied effort, Nad turned his friend over to look at his face. Yiddir lifted one of Karg's eyelids.

"He is dead," he commented. "Someone Stun Rayed him and then hit him over the head. Nad," he said, looking up gravely, "you and I were Stun Rayed while we slept."

Nad rose slowly, gathering a great breath into his lungs. Then he shouted, "Lylwani!" And he ran toward her cabin before Yiddir could advise him that her absence from the ship was the only possible deduction.

Weighted down by an awareness of ultimate tragedy, he sought the control room. The darkened pilot light over the meteor indicator confirmed his worst suspicions.

"She's gone! She's gone!" he heard Nad shouting to him.

Ron came reeling into the control room, his face white from the effects of the Stun Ray. In his eyes was one obvious question as he looked at Yiddir.

Yiddir replied, "Yes. It's happened. Sargon has struck at last, and Karg lost his life trying to oppose him."

Nad became ill with fever. For days he lay in his bunk, unable to eat or sleep, his eyes staring widely out of an ever thinning face. Sometimes he would talk or shout, as though in delirium. Yiddir doctored

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him as best he could, force feeding him at intervals, while he permitted the ship to hurtle onward through the darkness.

Ron's pale face remained absolutely expressionless, but a new purpose seemed to take hold of him. He, himself, manned the converters and took over most of Karg's old duties. At other times he would watch Yiddir for hours, mutely waiting for him to speak. There was no need to state the great question before them now. It was self-evident.

Without Lylwani, their expedition was futile, so why go on? Yet, why try to overtake either section of the fleet again? To what purpose? Was there a purpose at all?

Ron seemed to have a purpose, and he appeared to be waiting for Yiddir to perceive it and confirm its validity. But time passed. Many weeks passed, and Yiddir remained as inarticulate as Ron. Ron knew he was waiting for Nad to recover.

FINALLY, Nad did recover, but he appeared to have no will to live. When Yiddir thought he was strong enough, he at last voiced Ron's thoughts.

"There is only one thing we can do," he said. "We must establish our base on the small planet as planned. From there we will attempt to find the system or systems I am really looking for. Once we have found a real group of worthwhile planets and established photographic proof of their existence, we will use our converted drivers and try to overtake the Government Fleet. We will contact only Nor E-1-M, of the flagship. With our proofs, if we obtain what I think we are going to find, the fleet will turn back."

"I suppose you realize," said Nad, dully, "that it will take us a few more years at the least to acquire the proofs you want. By that time, to overtake either part of the fleet, even with your converted drive would occupy half a lifetime, if one survived madness and the increased danger of meteors."

"I admit that," said Yiddir. "But what else have we three to live for?"

"Nothing. Sheer blank, nothing."

"Then I suggest we adhere to the plan I have outlined.""

"All right," Nad replied. "I hope we can all cling to our sanity in the meantime."

Ron got to his feet and limped over to the control board. He examined the instruments with renewed interest . . . .

A year of darkness passed, during which time Yiddir began again to decelerate. This time he conditioned himself and the others to withstand a slowly increased deceleration rate until they were living under a very abnormal induced gravity. His object was to emerge from the velocity of darkness soon enough to leave a safe margin between them and the dark nebula.

But before they had quite emerged from the darkness, their meteor shield failed them once more, and

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this time a small meteor struck them squarely. The cryosite hull took the blow, but inertia resulting from their slight change of course came near to killing them. From that day forward, Yiddir's health began to wane as the result of internal injjuries.

Furthermore, it was discovered that as a result of the collision with the meteor the controls to the drivers were severed, and all they had left were their decelerators.

"It will be necessary for one of us to go outside in a space suit and inspect the damage to see if it can be repaired," Yiddir said. "I believe I am physically incapable of going out there, and Ron's bad foot may hinder him seriously. Moreover, I am not sure that he would be able to learn quickly enough what I'd have to teach him. Even if I did teach him, he would no doubt be terrorized by the experience. I'm afraid you're the only one who could do the job, Nad. We still have several months' time while we decelerate, but by that time those controls should be repaired, or I'm afraid I won't be able to bring us safely in to our planet. I'll have to begin instructing you at once concerning what you're going to have to look for and possibly repair."

There was nothing else to be done. For seemingly endless weeks Yiddir instructed Nad, while Ron took over almost all the duties on board. In the meantime the stars reappeared and the dark nebula was apparently so close that it formed one side of the whole universe. The sun of the one planet solar system they sought was still a star, but of the brightest magnitude in their region of space. In the telescope they could discern the tiny pinpoint of light that was their planet, but only for a short period of time while it was in full phase.

The chief problem was to decelerate fast enough to escape falling within the inimical influence of the nebula. Yet in Yiddir's condition no greater deceleration could be endured. In fact, Nad secretly decreased the deceleration rate sometimes when Yiddir fainted or dropped into fitful sleep. Inevitably, they came closer to the nebula than they had intended. Ron knew what was happening, because he had been a witness to Nad's special adjustment of these controls. Strangely, he showed no fear of the consequences. He was Nad's silent companion in all things now.

One day when Yiddir felt well enough to make observations he became greatly alarmed by their position. Already, some portions of the universe that had been plainly visible before were turning dim because they had penetrated the attenuated outer limits of the nebula.

"Nad, we can wait no longer," he said. "You've got to go outside and see what you can do about those driver controls. Our course must be changed quickly or we will be at grips with unpredictable fields and extremes of gravity that may do us great harm or cause us to become lost irretrievably within the nebula."

So Nad donned his suit, picked up his tools and instruments, and enter-

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ed the main airlock, while Ron stood tensely by, watching with widened eyes. But again Nad knew this was not fear. It was apprehension for his own safety. He waved at his brother reassuringly just as the outer door opened, exposing him to the vast Abyss. The rush of air out of the lock would have carried him into emptiness if it had not been for his magnetic traction produced by his shoes. Only then did he suddenly realize how alone he really was.

Before him, endless space yawned apathetically, coldly, and silence greater than he had ever known gripped him like the hand of Death. In spite of the grip maintained by his magnetic shoes, he had to struggle with giddiness and instinctive terror. Under Yiddir's guidance over the sonophone extension that he dragged behind him, he moved aft along the dimly glistening hull, like a deep-sea diver in a bottomless ocean.

For two hours, Nad worked in the damaged area of the drivers, relaying his observations to Yiddir. He cut open hard cryosite channels to get at control conduits, bridged damaged gaps with his instruments and waited for Yiddir's readings from the control panels inside.

Three times, Nad had to enter the ship and return to the outside, and thus another day passed, while they penetrated deeper into the nebula, and the stars became almost lost to sight. But now he was outside for the last time. This time he was finishing the job.

When Yiddir gave a cry of triumph and the drivers spit out a lightning blast in response to his controls, Nad knew his precarious work was done and he stood up, preparing to enter the ship again.

RON had entered a small observation dome in the center of the ship in an effort to watch Nad. From his position he could make out the dim outlines of the aft driver nacelles, and there he saw his brother trying to collect his tools, preparatory to re-entering the ship.

At that moment, a slight attenuation in the nebulous gas outside enabled Ron to discern something that was utterly incredible to him. Briefly he saw it, a great, shadowy outline that stood out clearly for one moment and then was gone again. *A ship!* A ship exactly like their own, drifting helplessly in the nebula!

Then he saw it again, this time much nearer. He could see its forward observation port, ablaze now with light, and a woman's face appeared behind it, peering out at him.

"Lylwani!" he thought, his mind reeling with astonishment.

But he was given little time for speculation, because in the same instant he saw a grotesque figure move on the exterior of the other ship's hull. Sargon, too, had come outside to effect repairs.

Just as the ships drifted within the influence of their mutual attraction, Nad straightened up and faced Sargon. Ron knew they were looking at each other and waiting for the two ships to come together. He also

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knew that Nad could not help seeing something else, something which must have made him go insane with rage and anguish. For just in the last brief moment of visibility, Lylwani could be seen very plainly in the observation port. In her arms was an infant child.

Ron saw both space-suited figures lunge toward each other, each with a blinding white cryosite torch in his hand, and then the curtain of the nebula suddenly engulfed the scene.

SUDDENLY, Ron darted forward as fast as his club foot would allow, and he was just in time to stay Yiddir's hand at the controls. If the drivers had been activated, the other ship might have been lost forever, and if Nad had stepped across to it they would have lost him, also.

Yiddir had felt the impact of the other vessel, but as he could not see it from his location he had no idea what it was. Then, to his wonderment, Ron momentarily found his voice.

"S—Sargon!" he said, hoarsely, with an almost superhuman effort.

"Sargon!" Yiddir's old eyes blazed with alarm.

Speech failing him again, Ron went through a frantic pantomime to show how the two vessels had come together and how Nad and Sargon had charged each other in mortal combat.

Hastily, Yiddir went to the central observation blister and tried to observe what was happening. But now the dark gases were too dense. He could occasionally discern the shadowy outline of the other hull, plus a dim glow of light from the other observation port, but he could see nothing else. In fact, even that faded out as the two ships were carried into regions of maximum density.

He and Ron could only sit there and wait, well aware of the long pent-up emotions that were being unleashed out there in that precarious darkness. At any moment the nebula could throw them into a new spin and lose the other ship forever.

Yiddir asked Ron if he had seen any sign of Lylwani, and Ron nodded assent. He made a cradle of his arms and moved them back and forth, significantly.

"What!" Yiddir exclaimed. "She has a child?"

Again, Ron nodded affirmatively. Yiddir reflected that more than a year had passed since Lylwani's abduction. Terror gripped his heart to think that she and the infant were so close in this infinite emptiness and that one lurch of the ship could lose them forever. His heart was with Nad, too, in his understanding of what his emotions must be. He could not begrudge him the rage and anguish that had hurled him against Sargon.

But what of the outcome? Suppose Sargon should win?

Just then there came to their ears the muffled sound of air compressors, and both of them knew that someone had entered the airlock. They ran to it without weighing

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the possible consequences.

There in the lock was a figure in a space-suit, but they could not tell whether it was Nad or Sargon. As they watched, the figure dragged in behind it another figure clad in a space-suit, and both observers felt their pulse surge with a new hope. This was either Sargon dragging Nad, or Nad dragging Sargon, and in either case they knew that Nad was still with them.

Hastily, Yiddir activated the valves and the outer door closed while air shot back into the lock. The figure outside opened the inner door before Yiddir could perform the service for him. At the same time, the standing figure helped the prone figure to its feet. Then the first figure opened its faceplate, and Sargon spoke to them, peremptorily.

"Help me with this suit, quick!" Whereupon he started to dismantle the other figure's suit. Yiddir unscrewed the helmet and lifted it hastily, expecting to find Nad.

But there before him was the pale face of Lylwani! And he and Ron observed again in her eyes the childishness of a victim of the M-Ray.

"Baby!" she gasped, as she struggled in the depths of her suit, and Yiddir was alarmed to hear the muffled scream of an infant.

When he stripped off the top section, the small child came to light, its face almost blue from partial asphyxiation.

Ron helped Lylwani to a seat, while Yiddir stood there trying to contain himself. His mind staggered under the impact of the realization of what Sargon had done. Jealous of Lylwani's newly acquired memory of Nad and love for him, Sargon had subjected her to the M-Ray, and then he had forced her to be his mate.

He turned on Sargon, his face red with rage. "You dirty, foul beast of Satan!" he exclaimed.

In their distraction with Lylwani and the child they had not seen Sargon extract an M-Ray from his space-suit. He was half out of it now, and he stood there looking at them with a menacing scowl.

"You might as well take it this way," he said. "We're all in this together, and if we want to survive we'll have to work together. I've been struggling with a disabled ship for months. Now it's gone to God knows where in the nebula. It jerked loose just as I brought Lylwani over."

"But what happened to Nad?" asked Yiddir. "Did you kill him and leave him outside?"

"Neither one," replied Sargon, the shadow of a grim smile on his lips. "He lost pretty much air when I cracked his faceplate, but I think he'll live, because I brought him inside."

"Inside!" Yiddir's eyes widened in horror, incredulous. "Inside *what?*"

"Inside the other ship."

"You mean—" Yiddir staggered, fighting to keep from passing out.

"Yes," snarled Sargon. "In the

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other ship out there lost in the nebula. If he manages to recover, he'll find himself in a disabled ship, fully capable of supplying him with all the food and water and air he needs —but a drifting derelict."

"But, good God! He'll go mad!"

"It's less than he deserves," Sargon replied, divesting himself of the rest of his suit. "It's just the way I wanted it. Killing was too good for him. I think he saw Lylwani and the child. I want him to spend a lot of time in absolute loneliness thinking about that. I hope he never goes mad. I hope he spends his whole life thinking about it!"

Just as Yiddir dropped to the floor, overcome by shock in his weakened condition, Ron lunged at Sargon's legs and bore him to the floor. In a blind frenzy of hate, he sought the Martian's throat. But Sargon landed a mighty rabbit punch on the back of his neck and he slumped into unconsciousness.

IT was Sargon who piloted the ship out of the nebula and plotted a straight course to the planet. When Yiddir felt better, Sargon had a talk with him.

"When my ship became disabled," he said, "I had to abandon my original plans for returning to the fleet. I figured that if I could make it to the planet I was lucky. Well, I couldn't make repairs in time to keep from tangling with the nebula, and I had about given up hope when I drifted into you. *That* was just unheard of luck! Wouldn't have happened again in a million years."

"Sargon," said Yiddir, bitterly, "do you think that you will ever be able to really enjoy life again, knowing what you've done with Nad? You condemned him to that terrible fate at a time when your emotions were governing your reasoning, but later on, in your more sober moments of reflection, you may be haunted by the vision of him, a lonely madman drifting helplessly in the nebula."

Sargon scowled. "He can always open the airlock," he said. *"I'd* do it. It's the easy way out. Besides, he may be dead anyway. He was out cold when I left him.

"But that's all behind us now. What I'm concerned with is the future. To return to either section of the fleet, even with your converted drive, would take years. If it were just straight distance to cover we could make it much sooner, but both fleets are moving, too, much faster than light. Well, I've thought it all over a lot of times. I've weighed my possible rewards and advantages to be derived from returning to the arks against the terrible years of waiting through such a long journey. It's not worth it, so it looks like the planet is the answer."

Yiddir then carefully outlined his own ideas concerning further exploration. He emphasized the importance of notifying the Government Fleet, at any sacrifice, in the event such a discovery could be made.

"I am quite sure I have not long

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to live," he continued. "So you will have to do it, Sargon. As a member of the human race, it is your duty to do it. Your own rebel section of the fleet might conceivably come back and try to invade any planets colonized by Government forces, and whether they might succeed in taking over or not would make little difference. What matters is the people. They must be given a chance. Once installed in a suitable natural environment, I have complete confidence that our species can outlive any form of dictatorial rule that can be imposed upon it. That has always been borne out to be true in the past and I don't see why it shouldn't be true in the future."

"That's neither here nor there," replied Sargon impatiently. "As far as your idea about a better solar system is concerned, I think that's a little imaginative. I was a first hand witness to previous explorations in this region, you know, and I can tell you there's nothing out here but this one little planet. I'm not going to spend my time—"

Yiddir's eyes flashed indignantly. "Sargon," he interrupted, "have you any idea of who I really am?"

"Yes, I know. Yiddir E-5172-P was an alias."

"And my real name is?"

"Korlon E-3-N. All right, so you used to be captain of the ark. But that was many years ago, and—"

"I was also something else!"

"So you were a famous scientist, too. But that's not—"

Yiddir sat up in his bunk and grasped Sargon's powerful arm. "Don't you realize," he argued, "that I was, even at the time of your exploration of this region, the most qualified astro-physicist on board? I had my own equipment which I had improved over your own. I *know* what I'm saying when I tell you there are other suns in this region which are favorable to our existence!"

"Suns, maybe, yes, but not planets. We've looked, and there aren't any more."

"Then let Ron go exploring, after you've settled. Promise me you'll do at least that!"

Sargon laughed. "*That* coward! What could he do but shake to pieces with fright at the mere thought of being left alone in a space ship!"

Yiddir was too weak to argue further. But as the ship drew nearer to the small planet and he lay helplessly in his bunk, he was not at a loss for subjects upon which to meditate through the long hours.

WHEN the planet acquired a visible disk, Ron and even Lylwani became interested, although the latter was merely attracted to it because of its beautiful color and changing aspect. To Ron, however, it was fascinating because he knew how rare this planet was. He knew that it was on such a world that his ancestors had been born. As he observed its atmosphere, glowing like a silvery halo in the telescope, and as he saw its green jungles and smouldering young mountains and

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steaming oceans — he would often think of Yldra, who might have been there at his side, looking at all this for the first time. And then he would rescue his mind from vertigo by thinking of something outside the sphere of his personal emotions. The Government Fleet . . . he strove to keep his mind on that. The fleet, with its hundreds of thousands of people, moving outward, ever outward into vastness, searching vainly for a new home, for a natural way of life, for a means of survival . . .

Sargon effected a safe landing on a wild stretch of beach beside a primitive sea. Towering carboniferous forests loomed above them, and the bright sun shone hotly through a humid atmosphere. Gravitation was light, however, and it was a tremendous relief to everyone to be freed from the oppressive burden of deceleration. Even Yiddir felt well enough to give Sargon some assistance with the scientific problems connected with their emergence into this primitive world.

Air, water, solar radiations, samples of soil, fauna and flora—all had to be analyzed carefully. If Yiddir had not been able to help Sargon, certain mistakes might have been made which would have resulted in an early death for all of them. Very fortunately for them, the space ship's cosmic energy converters were in good working condition, and they lived by synthesis as usual.

Inasmuch as the ship, designed to house a hundred Passengers, was roomy, self-sufficient, and impervious to the influences of their surroundings, Sargon could see no reason for building permanently on the ground. This was disappointing to Yiddir, because as long as Sargon and Lylwani and the child, Dirno, required the ship for a home, the possibilities of using it for further explorations were reduced proportionately. He had no hope of being able to make the exploratory trips himself, because he was virtually an invalid now. He tried occasionally to prevail upon Sargon to make an attempt to find the better solar system he knew existed in that region, but as Sargon procrastinated and time passed, the old man was finally forced to give up all hope of finding reasons for contacting either portion of the fleet. Here he would certainly die, and the little generation of brothers and sisters to be produced by Sargon and Lylwani would have to establish a new humanity here. In the meantime, Ron waited in silence— for what, no one knew, but he gave everybody the impression of patient waiting.

A year passed, not without some progress. They explored and mapped most of the planet by air. They also found a new base, on a plateau overlooking a broad inland sea of fresh water. Here the jungle was less aggressive and the forms of animal life were less carnivorous and destructive. They could go about without space suits at last, and the change and outdoor exercise worked a great improvement on all of them except Yiddir, who was the victim

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of recurrent hemorrhages as a result of his old injuries.

Sargon had even begun to take interest in establishing a permanent base on the ground. He learned how to use lumber. When he needed other materials, such as metal, he had only to synthesize it in the converters. Base metallic stock could be melted, cast, forged, machined. In time, the foundations of a large building began to take shape, with Ron's willing assistance. Lylwani busied herself quite happily with her small son, Dirno, while Yiddir sat often in the mild sunlight of late afternoons and watched her in unhappy reflection. He thought of another man whose companionship might have enriched her life a hundredfold. And then he would sigh and wish for death to overtake him . . .

ONE day when all of them were eating together in the ship, Lylwani made a statement so startling that no one took another bite after she spoke. As she had done during her previous period of recovery from the M-Ray, she had also progressed this time to the point where she could think independently, at least as a child, and hold a simple conversation. As they sat discussing the small events of the day, some mention was made of Yiddir's long white beard and Sargon's bushy black one.

"But I like gold colored beards best," she said, without preamble. She continued eating as though she had made the most casual remark in the world.

Sargon reacted first, perhaps ten seconds sooner than Yiddir or Ron. He lowered his fork and spoke to her.

"Where did you ever see such a beard?" he asked.

She looked up and smiled sweetly at him. "The man in the forest has one," she said, innocently.

Sargon looked at Yiddir and saw his own thoughts reflected in the other's faded eyes. He got to his feet.

"*What* man in the forest?"

Lylwani looked up, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "Oh, he's a very wonderful man," she said. "He is so kind to me and Dirno. He has such strange eyes, and his hair and beard are all made of gold."

Sargon walked around the table and grasped her by the arm. "Where did you see this man?" he demanded.

Lylwani began to cry. She disliked and could never understand Sargon's roughness.

"Just a minute!" Yidder interrupted. "If you want any information, leave her to me. You'll get nothing out of her by frightening her."

Sargon knew that Lylwani was very fond of Yiddir. In any other circumstance he would have bullied her, jealously asserting his assumed prerogatives as father of her child, but now he gave in and stepped aside. He sat down at the table again and watched her intently as Yiddir questioned her and Ron watched the proceedings and listened with a pale, tense look of desperation.

"Lylwani," said Yiddir, gently,

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"Please help us. We want to know your man with the golden beard, too. It must be a very wonderful sight. Won't you tell us more about him?

Finally, Lylwani complied. She related how he had first contacted her several weeks before. Ron had built a little summer house for her and the child, where she could rest and enjoy the fresh air and be shielded from the hot sunlight. It was some distance removed from the ship, but in plain view, except that it blocked from view a patch of jungle immediately behind it.

One day, she told them, the golden bearded man had come to her from the jungle. He had called her by her name and spoken very nicely to her and played with Dirno. Then, when Sargon had approached the place, he had seemed angry and had gone back into the jungle. Three times he had come to see her. Yes, she confirmed, he had worn clothing, but it was very ragged, and he carried no weapons with him.

"He shouldn't be afraid of us, should he?" she asked. "Why can't we invite him to stay with us?"

"Man! Man!" gurgled Dirno, happily.

"You see!" Lylwani smiled. "Dirno knows who we mean. He wants him, too. Why don't you bring him here?"

"Yes," said Sargon, with a mirthless grin, "I think we should bring the man here . . . "

THAT afternoon and all the next day Sargon roamed the jungle with two Disruptors, but he did not go too far astray. Frequently he would seek out a place where he could look back at the plateau where the ship was. Then he would stalk his intended quarry again.

Finally, hunger drove him back to the ship that night. He was surprised to find that Ron was absent, because Ron had evidenced a marked fear of the forest with its mysterious denizens. When Ron finally returned, he gave every evidence, by his extreme exhaustion and torn clothing, of having been on the same quest all day. In his hand he carried a Stun Ray. Sargon's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. There was no necessity for anyone to say anything. It was tacitly understood that a simple sort of primordial law had set in, and the outcome of each individual's efforts now was in the hands of fate. The stakes were grimly vital.

The next morning, however, Ron could not find his Stun Ray. In the whole ship neither he nor Yiddir could find a single hand weapon.

"Sargon must have concealed them last night," said Yiddir at last.

For answer, Ron started off empty handed toward the jungle.

"Ron!" Yiddir called, helpless to follow. "Come back!"

But Ron did not stop, and soon his limping figure was lost to view in the deep shadow of the towering trees.

"Are they looking for the golden-man?" asked Lylwani, innocently.

Yiddir put his arm around her, affectionately. "Yes, Lylwani," he an-

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swered.

"Oh I hope they find him. I hope he comes back again!" she said.

"Yes. I hope *he* comes back . . . "

BY noon that day, Sargon discovered the other ship. There was every sign that its pilot had taken great pains to conceal it. It lay in a deep gulley, half covered with fallen vines and trees that had been burned down with the ship's Disruptor cannons.

Without the slightest hesitation, Sargon set his Disruptors to maximum and fired at the ship. Time after time he fired, while explosions rocked the ground and the ship became a white inferno of dissolution.

Then he ran, fearing that he might have failed to destroy one or more of the reactors. Disrupted by the heat and explosions, unbalanced reaction might set in and they would blow, which was what he really wanted. A full atomic blast would clean out the last vestige of this thing he hated, and perhaps its pilot as well, if he were lurking somewhere within half a mile.

Eyes wide with the excitement of mingled triumph and awareness of mortal danger, he ran through the jungle like a madman. Once he dropped a Disruptor and it fell between mighty tree roots into some recess that he could not reach. There was no time to look for it. He ran onward, never daring to stop.

When he had traversed a good mile and a half of the jungle, the reactors blew. In one brief instant everything stood out in blinding contrast, illuminated by a flash of intense light that came near to blinding him. Then came a sound that he felt more than heard because he was momentarily deafened by it. He groveled under a great fallen log as the shock wave followed.

Giant trees crashed all about him and debris flew with the velocity of a hurricane. The jungle life set up one huge din, a roar and shrieking and bleating of abject terror.

He got to his feet and ran again, stumbling and picking himself up and running again, to get out of the area which he knew would soon be blighted by radioactive dust.

Close to the clearing where his own ship lay, he stumbled again, momentarily losing his grip on his one remaining Disruptor. As he lay there, panting, looking at the deadly weapon just three feet from him, he heard a crashing in the underbrush ahead. Then there stepped into his view, not twenty feet away, a man with golden blond hair and a year's growth of blond beard. A pair of gray eyes looked at him out of shadows that had never been there before — shadows of terror and near madness, filled with haunting memories of secret things that no other man had ever seen. It seemed to Sargon in that moment that this unarmed, half naked mortal enemy of his was looking at him from out of the grave. His body was full and hardened, in apparently excellent condition, but it was the look in his eyes that made Sargon lunge toward

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his Disruptor.

Just then a body hurtled over his head and Ron fell flat on the Disruptor, clutching it so tightly in his arms that Sargon could not dislodge him in time. He sprang to his feet just in time to receive a blow from the bearded one that sent him staggering off balance into the bushes.

When he could see clearly again, he saw Ron hand the Disruptor to Nad. Nad only stood there looking at Sargon with his death-haunted eyes, while Sargon's flesh crept and he sweated.

"You left me without weapons," said Nad, in a toneless voice. "Even if I had chosen suicide—which I did *not!*" His gray eyes blazed. "I could only have chosen the Abyss. That's the way you wanted it, wasn't it? There are no weapons at your ship, either. You seem to enjoy holding all the cards, don't you, Sargon?"

A deathly stillness ensued, while Nad just stood there looking at him.

"How—how did you—" Sargon stammered.

"How did I survive?" Nad finished the sentence for him. "How did I repair the ship? Thanks to Yiddir's patient instructions, I know more about what was wrong than you did. But a lot has happened since then. Before emerging from the nebula I was drawn to its center, where I made an amazing discovery, thanks to you. I found —" He paused, looking at Sargon with cold deliberation. "But you're never going to see it, so why should I tell you? Get on your feet!"

Sargon scrambled to his feet. "All right, you've won!" he shouted, white with fear. "Take everything! Take the ship! Take Lylwani and Dirno, but don't shoot me in cold blood!"

Suddenly, Nad looked down at the Disruptor as though he had forgotten it was in his hands. Then, to Ron's amazement, he threw it away with all his might, and it became lost in impenetrable undergrowth.

"This is what I have waited for—and dreamed of—during all the time I spent—out there." He started toward Sargon. "I've got to do it with my bare hands!" he yelled, and he charged.

Sargon's confidence returned when he saw the Disruptor fly over the bushes, and in the same instant he knew this was what he wanted, too. With a fierce shout of triumph, he met Nad's charge . . .

Ron stood motionlessly to one side, watching them. He knew that this was inevitable. He also knew, somehow, that Nad preferred to die rather than accept outside help, even if Ron had been able to give it. Nor was it a matter of principle, it was a life-consuming hate that could only be expended in one way. Ron knew he had to leave both of them alone. He knew that if Sargon killed Nad he would have to stand there and watch him die.

As he watched, what he witnessed sickened him so that he felt faint. His legs failed him and he sat down. He did not know how two human bodies could take such punishment

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and still keep on struggling. The towering, pristine jungle held them as though in its lap, like some primitive god, understanding its children who obeyed the earliest law ever written — that which rules all the forces of construction and destruction, of love and hate, of survival and death . . .

It lasted about fifteen minutes. Nad dragged himself, somehow, off of Sargon's prostrate body and stood up. He groped, as one blind, took two steps, and then fell on his face. Ron struggled with him and finally got him on his feet again. As he left the small clearing, he looked back at Sargon and shuddered. There was no doubt that Sargon was absolutely dead . . .

SO it was that Nad returned out of virtual limbo. He and Ron and Yiddir, with Lylwani and the small son of Sargon, left the small planet behind them— a planet that was still too young to receive them and too small to support the potential expansion of a new human race.

Nad piloted the ship back to the nebula and plunged directly into its weird darkness. He refused to tell even Yiddir what he had found, except to say that it was definitely the end of their search. There was a tense time of waiting, during which they struggled with the freak gravitational fields and ether warps within the nebula.

Then, suddenly, they burst into the tremendous interior, and Yiddir's heart leapt in exultation. For there it was, the solar system he had detected — a more spectacular and beautiful system than he could have imagined in his most optimistic dreams. Ron and Lylwani joined him in wonderment and awe.

Four white suns filled that tremendous chamber with a light that was sheer heavenly splendor. They formed the center of a system which possessed at least eight major planets, five minor ones and a decorative host of thousands of planetoids and satellites. None of them showed distinct phases, because the sunlight seemed to be everywhere. On the "night side" of the various planets there was only a silvery twilight.

The world Nad had chosen was the fourth minor planet. It was roughly nine thousand miles in diameter and possessed about one-sixth land area and five-sixths water area. Yiddir knew even before he analyzed it that the atmosphere was healthful.

They landed by a broad river, just above a great waterfall, on a plateau that overlooked green jungle and a broad, blue ocean. At that altitude, the jungle had given way to mighty forests of coniferous trees, interspersed with great, rolling green prairie-lands that swept gently away and upward to snow-capped mountains.

"This is Paradise," said Yiddir. "Thank God I've lived to see it!"

TWO years passed, during which Yiddir's life faded slowly away and new life took his place, for to Lylwani was born a baby girl, whom

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they named Yldra. The boy, Dirno, and his step-sister, Yldra, throve in their healthful environment as though their race had been indigenous to it. Lylwani made rapid recovery and happily accepted Nad as her man, forever.

Ron seemed to be the only one who was not content to adjust himself. He worked harder than anyone else to establish a permanent base on the ground. A sturdy house of wood and steel took shape. Storehouses, work-shops and sheds followed. Out of the ship's converters came metal, which was processed, forged and machined — under Yiddir's occasional supervision. New hand weapons were made, and the Disruptor cannons were transferred to permanent installations on the ground, as a source of nuclear energy. And at last certain plants and animals were domesticated. The foundation for a natural adjustment to the new world was finally set.

It was when Yiddir finally lay on his death bed that his ultimate wish was expressed.

"Your little beginning here," he said to Nad and Lylwani, "will require a millenium to bear substantial fruit. I regret very much that neither part of our divided fleet may ever know of this paradise you have discovered. By now the rebel fleet should be more than half way to its goal, and there is no one who can turn their course to this place. I wish they might be turned back before they invade those other planets. Even if they are rebels, all the Passengers should certainly be considered. They should be given a chance. Dictatorial governments come and go, but humanity goes on forever.

"Still, if there were a choice to be made, I'd prefer to notify the Fleet Government. The rebels have some sort of chance on those other worlds, if they survive the conflict, but the other arks are only plunging ever more deeply into the Unknown. I can understand why it is impossible for you, Nad, to go. It would take more than half a lifetime to catch up with them now, even with the converted drivers. Still, it is sad to think that Dirno and Yldra, your children, will find themselves alone in this great solar system after you are gone."

Yiddir's dimming eyes did not fail to notice that Ron was standing in the background, listening intently. "If you ever could contact the Government Fleet," he said, "it would be worth more than life, itself. I'd try to locate Nor E-1-M, because he is the only person I can think of who might possibly be able to defend this place against the rebels, should they ever come back here exploring. There are some among their number who suspected the existence of this place more than they cared to admit to their companions."

Nad thought silently for a long while, and Yiddir smiled inwardly when he observed that Ron had disappeared.

"I could leave Ron with Lylwani," Nad said, finally.

Yiddir laid his withered hand on

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his arm. "It would take years, Nad. Years. Your children would be grown to adulthood before you reached the arks."

A ripple of muscles appeared along Nad's jaws. "But it must be done!" he exclaimed.

Just then, he heard a roar of rockets outside, accompanied by an unmistakable "swoosh!" He tried to jump to his feet, but Yiddir held him.

"Relax, Nad!" exclaimed Yiddir. "I knew it was going to happen. This is what he has been waiting for. It took great courage, but he has found that in full measure at last."

Nad glared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Ron," said Yiddir, with his last breath, "has gone to find Nor— to bring back the Government Fleet. A poor, misguided coward with a club foot, who fought his cowardice and failed, only to lose Yldra, whom he loved perhaps in a way and with a depth of feeling which we could never understand. And finally the shock of that loss has made of him such a hero that his name may shine through all the pages of Man's future history—if he—succeeds . . ."

WHEN Dirno was seventeen years old, Nad and Lylwani had almost forgotten the strange and all but hopeless mission of Ron. There were three more children, two boys and a girl. All the elements of their natural environment had combined to assist their adaptation to normal life, and their parents found the afternoon of their existence to be the fulfillment of human desire—except for infrequently recurrent memories that sometimes haunted Nad in his deeper moments of reflection.

Sometimes in the still hours of the night when Lylwani lay sleeping beside him, his mind would still wander out beyond the stupendous, black walls of the nebula and try to find his lost brother, Ron. He would quail at the thought of the other's loneliness, riding the star-roads outward toward the edge of the galaxy, searching for an invisible fleet. Logic told him that Ron had failed, that in using the ultra-velocity available from the converted drivers he had made himself the victim of meteors— or that a lifetime of terrible loneliness had robbed him at last of his sanity. Sometimes he would dream that Ron was a white-haired maniac, whose star-blinded eyes stared at him from afar out of the Abyss, and he would awake with a start . . .

NOR E-1-M was a man in his early seventies, still straight of limb and of an alert, military manner. His distinguishing mane of gray hair was vigorous and thick, and his blue eyes reflected a brightness of mind that had defied the years. For one week he and his medical staff had worked on the stranger from the Abyss. Under special second order type rays of his own devising, he had thrown the man's conscious mind into a restful coma, and his nervous system was subjected to a complete reenergizing process. When they

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brought him back to consciousness, he was able to talk, haltingly, but effectively. He told them of a hidden paradise lying within the depths of the dark nebula, and of Yiddir and Nad and Sargon and Lylwani and the children and the rebel fleet.

"Of course you may think me insane," said Ron, wearily.

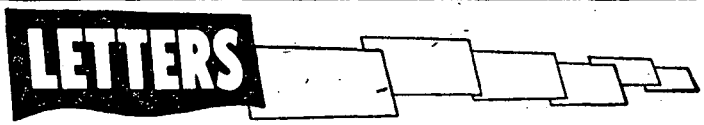
"On the contrary," Nor smiled. "I know this Yiddir of whom you speak, and I am quite sure the discovery you mention was actually made. In fact, we are going to return to the nebula. We may require another generation of time to reach it, but we will get there. If the rebel fleet has returned there and established a dictatorial government, we will overcome that government . . . "

"But they have the M-Ray," Ron reminded him.

"And I have, at long last, finally perfected an effective screen against it—plus a lot more," Nor told him, calmly.

"You!—" Ron's eyes widened. "But only Yiddir's son—"

Nor smiled again. "This Yiddir you speak of," he said, "was in reality Korlon E-3-N. I know, because he was my father . . . "



RAY CAPELLA, JR.

In all probability, this letter will not see print; because it is a sort of commentary on another magazine and a critique of OW.

A new science-fiction magazine came out recently and set up a new and better standard to S-F stories. I'm sorry to say it was *not* OW, but *Galaxy Science Fiction*. Said magazine set up such a standard that its competitors will have a hard time getting stories that can match it. However, OW does not figure in this competition.

It is not that OW is in a lower bracket than Galaxy and cannot compare with it; by all means this is not so! But OW is in a different field, the field of what is sometimes called "adventure fantasy" or maybe "science adventure". It is a field somewhere betwen "slick" stf and "thud and blunder" stories. OW and MADGE are the king and queen of this facet of the great gem called "science-fiction and fantasy"; they have the best in "thud and blunder" and new fantasies.

You noticed, of course, that in that last sentence I did not mention science-fiction. There's the point of my letter. What I'm trying to put across is that OW (and MADGE, for that matter) is not up to the new standard of S-F stories. They are following the misguided footsteps of the later *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*—even to the lack of novels, the over-abundance of little articles and the small letter section.

I don't particularly care for *Galaxy*. To me, it seems a bit too stuck-up, and its book reviewer, though good, is always reviewing fantasies from the S-F point of view, which is about the biggest mistake a re-

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viewer can make. A look at the review of "Ship of Ishtar" will show you a good example. I like OW better, but I'd like better stories in its S-F facet. It's already tops in art-work.

Of course, I'm appealing to OW's daring policy which permits any kind of criticism—for or against—to come into its letter section. I hope this sees print only to see how many fans share my point of view and will write to you in an attempt to bring about an even better OW.

480 Clinton Ave.
Brooklyn 16, N. Y.

You're right, Ray, we asked for comments from our readers and we'll print the letters we receive whether they point out faults in the magazine or praise it. However, your letter has us a little confused. You say that Galaxy has set up a new and better standard, then you turn around and say that you "don't particularly care for Galaxy" and that it "seems a bit stuck-up" to you. Is that what you consider a new and better type of science-fiction magazine? In OW we want to give you stories that you enjoy and that we enjoy—both science-fiction and fantasy. And on the science-fiction-side of the ledger, have you read "War of Nerves", "Skeleton Key", "Conditioned Reflex", "The Solution" and "The City" to mention just a few of the stories in past issues of OW? . . . Ed

JAN ROMANOFF

The Bok cover for the May issue was beautiful. It's really the best one he's done for you. Speaking of Bok covers, I notice that some fan (probably blind) actually had the utter gall to run a Bok cover into the ground! Well! Seriously I hope you have commissioned Bok for more covers. While we're on the subject of covers, I haven't seen one by Malcolm Smith. Last one he did for you was on th Sept. 1950 issue, I believe.

Which brings us to the editorial. You probably have the best editorials in the field. Your editorials strike a happy medium. Campbell goes to one extreme (usually read by calculus experts) and Hamling goes to the other extreme (read by people who have to be in by 9:00 on school nights).

Taking another quick glance at the contents page, I notice another instance of fan turned author. Namely, Bill Venable. Surprisingly enough, I would rate his story, short as it is, in second place. First place was copped by del Rey with his "If Ye Have Faith". To the people who have complained about the lack of new ideas in stories, this should be refreshing. Your own "Red Coral" was quite good as was "The Rocket Man" by Ludwig.

Your departments continue to be the most entertaining feature. Incidentally, those inside covers are something. More?

I'll bid my fond farewell with the hopeless utterance—get Bradbury.

26601 S. Western
Apt. 341
Lomita, Calif.

We have several Bok covers in the house, but we don't know when they will be scheduled. We'll have more inside cover features, and why be hopeless about Bradbury? We can and will run more of his stories . . . Ed

DAVE ISH

Last August I read "The Swordsmen of Varnis" in your September issue and thought it very funny, and every once in a while, I get it out and read it again. Well, I was read-reading Rog Phillips' "Club House" in *Amazing* the other day in an old Quarterly Re-Issue, and I read a re-

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view of a fanzine called *Slant* in which he recommended a story called "The Swordsmen of Varnis" which left me totally confused. I have tried to puzzle it out and have gotten nowhere since the author of "Varnis" was a Geoffrey Cobbe, and the writer of your story was Clive Jackson. Could it be that you spotted the story in *Slant* and asked Cobbe if he would like it printed? And that Cobbe used a pen name of Clive Jackson? Please explain what goes on.

914 Hammond Rd
Ridgewood, N. J.

You aren't confused, Dave. You got it figured. Cobbe was the pen name, and he wanted his real name on the story for OW. Yes, we saw it in Slant and we bought it . . . Ed

EDITH OGUTSCH

Since OW first hit the stands, I haven't missed out on one issue. I could make this letter short and end it right there, because you'd need no other proof of my feelings, but being a woman, I'd like to have my say.

The main reason OW is my favorite s-f magazine is the warmth, the friendly personal touch that you maintain with your readers throughout the issue. Readers can feel when you are trying to give them as much as you can—and not merely looking for that quarter. Although ASF and *Galaxy* sometimes have better stories than OW, they are entirely too cold and impersonal. Frankly, I don't see where their stories are so much better than OW's but there are people who like to take their pseudo-scientific jargon in large doses—I prefer a similar story with more real characters, such as you feature.

May I make one or two suggestions? Instead of having dull fillers, as your half-page articles, why not a science fiction crossword puzzle to exercise your readers? Or a bit of fantasy poetry? Also the cartoons you feature are far too rare; a bit of humor never hurt anyone.

I find your artwork equally as high standard as your stories—which is important, because a badly illustrated story puts you off and you start the story with a mark against it already. Your Bok covers are always delicious and the one on your May issue should boost your circulation.

This is the first time I've written to a magazine letter column, and I only did so because I couldn't contain my enthusiasm any longer and just had to tell you how much OW brightens my drab horizon.

41-08 42nd Street
Long Island City 4, N. Y.

We enjoyed the warmth in your letter, too Edith! But it's 35c *not a quarter. Incidentally, we note that at least four other sf mags are now charging an extra dime. Guess we'll have to make an effort to get even better stories to keep up with them! Your suggestions are good. We'll try to make those filler pages as interesting as the rest of the book. Good cartoons are hard to get. The readers have a sense of humor, but it seems cartoonists do not. At least least not an sf type of humor. We are trying hard to get the best illustrated mag in the business. Note this issue and the next for some of the evidence of those efforts. And write again, Edith, you sure brighten our horizon! . . . Ed*

S/SGT. ROBERT D. MILLER

The first time I had ever read or heard of OW was *way* back in October of 1950. Since that time I have been trying, time and again, to obtain another copy in order to place a subscription. The fact alone that I am in an Overseas The-

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atre is more than enough to explain this plight, however, the Miracle happened and my subscription has been entered.

As for the stories in the January issue I rate "Courtesy Call" in first place for many reasons. This was a great story because it seemed to bridge the gap that separates stf from the hum-drum of everyday drudgery of service life.

An interesting coincidence occurred to Yours Truly the other day, in that he acquired a copy of Ray Bradbury's MARTIAN CHRONICLES, and in reading it was surprised to discover that the first story he had ever read in OW was included in this loosely bound group of Chronicles. This story was "Way Up In The Middle Of The Air", which appeared in your July ssue.

I like your editorials very much. I enjoy your brand of cover. I always enjoy reading the letters you receive, but I do not like jumping all over the mag to read them. Of particular interest to me are the advertisements of novels, because being overseas I cannot go into bookstores, lay down the money and walk out like I could "Stateside".

And how about more stories by Rog Phillips. Something along his Matrix line? Also enjoyed very much are John & Dorothy DeCourcy, A. E. van Vogt, A. R. Steber, and of course David Gordon.

I shall leave you now with one more thought. How can I subscribe to IMAGINATION?

Hq 2nd Air Rescue Sqdn
Clark Air Base
Philippine Islands

Well, Bob, since you're a Rog Phillips fan you'll be glad to hear that he is working on a novel-length story for us at present, and we also have a new David Gordon story on hand which will be appearing very soon. As for IMAGINATION, send your subscription to The Greenleaf Publishing Company, 1426 Fowler, Evanston, Ill. . . . Ed

EDITORIAL

(*continued from page 5*)

OTHER WORLDS intends to attempt to answer that question in the future by a very special issue. We are in the process of preparing an issue of OTHER WORLDS which will contain *only* stories and articles and features (and even letters) from editors! Now, the secret is out, and you know what to expect. We hope you'll be watching for this unusual issue, because it will put each and every editor (who will agree to contribute!) on the spot. This includes your OW editor, and members of his editorial staff. We hope you like the stunt, and we predict you'll find that editors DO know a good story when they *write* one as well as *read* one!

. . . *Rap*

AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS FANTASY ILLUSTRATOR

(*Continued from page 2*)

the Railroad Fair, Shasta Publishers, Ziff-Davis (the home of Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures), and many other points of interest made my trip worthwhile. In addition, my search among the book

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stores and back-issue magazine stores proved highly rewarding. However, all of this is another story. The real highlight of the trip was my visit with St. John.

Arrangements were made to meet Mr. St. John at the Art Academy. Entering the main office of the school, the first object to attract my attention was a huge painting of Tarzan and Jad-Bal-Ja hanging above the door. It was immediately recognized as St. John's original for the book-jacket of "Tarzan and the Golden Lion."

The famous Frank H. Young, President and Founder of the American Academy of Art was introduced to me by my brother Haskell. He, in turn, took us back to St. John's room where he was teaching one of his classes in "Life" figure drawing. Mr. Young introduced me to Mr. St. John, a very tall and elderly gentleman, with a quiet and friendly voice. He immediately suggested that we walk into the next room for a chat. I noticed a familiar drawing on the wall of his classroom. It was one of the original illustrations from the book "Tarzan the Terrible," showing "Mo-Sar the tailed-man of Pal-ul-don carrying Jane (Tarzan's mate) away as she struggled and fought fiercely." Mr. St. John explained that he kept it framed in his classroom because it was one of the finest examples of a "wash drawing" that he had ever done.

Mr. Young, before he left us, commented briefly on the worth of Mr. St. John as an instructor and how much he meant to the Academy. He also praised his illustrating skill and stated that he was a very fine artist. Anyone in the field of Commercial Art will realize that this praise meant something coming from a man like Frank H. Young. Mr. Young is author of three of the best-known text books in advertising art — namely "Advertising Layout," "Modern Advertising Art," and "Technique of Advertising Layout," and has achieved international recognition as an authority in the field of commercial art.

I mentioned many specific St. John illustrations that appealed to me and also mentioned by date various illustrations from *Blue Book*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories* and other publications that were special favorites of mine. Mr. St. John not only seemed amazed at our knowledge of his work but was sincerely astounded that anyone had such an interest in his art. I assured him that he had hundreds of fans who admired his work immensely. Especially is this true of Burroughs' Fans

Coming In The September Issue

AMERICA'S NEW SECRET WEAPON ?

By Willy Ley

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who consider that Burroughs' tales and St. John pictures go together like ham and eggs. Mr. St. John seemed totally unaware of an organized fandom, closely knit together by their interest in Fantasy. In parting, Mr. St. John expressed much "appreciation of our appreciation" and invited us to visit him in his studio the next afternoon.

The next afternoon we arrived at St. John's address on Ontario Street and were shown into his studio where he also lives. The atmosphere of the studio, the massive easel, railed balcony, the hetrrogeneous mixture of drawings, paintings, and objects of art here and there, seemed in every way to be appropriate to our expectations. Indeed, the furnishings, the huge sky-light, the paintings of European and African scenes on the walls provided an ideal setting for the famed artist.

Knowing of our interest in Burroughs, Mr. St. John had gotten out a stack of his own personal collection of Burroughs illustrations to show us. They were stacked one against the other faced against the wall and we could see only one at a time. The very first one happened to be the frontispiece for "At the Earth's Core" — the one which is titled: "The Awful Thing Behind Me was Gaining Rapidly." Then one by one St. John would take a picture from the stack and place it on the easel where he could view it in comfort. Once or twice he seemed to forget just what story a particular painting illustrated — but old Burroughs fan that I am, I was able to identify each one on the instant! You can imagine the thrill of expectancy with which we awaited the removal—one by one—of the various paintings. My breath was almost taken away by the enormous size of the drawings and by the flawless technique and vivid imagination they demonstrated. I could write pages just describing these various paintings and the many little human interest stories connected with several of them. For example, soon after he had shown us the cover painting in color for the book jacket of "Pellucidar" he pulled out what I took to be the same painting, done not in colors, but in black and white. He placed them side by side and then small differences were noted. It seems that when the Editor at McClurg's saw the interior illustration of Dian the cave girl facing the saber-tooth tiger, he was so impressed that he asked St. John to paint the same scene in colors for the book jacket.

It was interesting to observe that St. John himself owned the first illustration he had ever done of John Carter of Mars, namely—the painting of the jacket for *"The Warlord of Mars."* (another artist, Frank E. Schoonover, had illustrated the first two Martian titles). Painted in oils on canvas, still on its original stretchers, it was nearly four feet high. He remarked that many years ago it had been exhibited in a public display and for this event he had painted out the lettering. It might be mentioned at this point that St. John in-

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variably did his own lettering and furthermore painted the lettering right on the painting. The A. C. McClurg Publishing Company liked his lettering so much that they insisted he do his own lettering. St. John has a most unique style in lettering which is all his own. The largest of all the paintings I saw was the one for the book jacket of *"At The Earth's Core."* This one was a beauty! St. John said, "This represents my very best work." He counts it the most valuable of his Burroughs' illustrations. A number of the interior illustrations from *"Tarzan the Terrible"* and *"The Chessmen of Mars"* have been retained by the artist. It might be mentioned here that many of the original McClurg editions of Burroughs' books contain several St. John pictures that were never reprinted in subsequent editions. Having a complete set of Burroughs' first editions, I was able to recognize many of these illustrations that never re-appeared in the reprints. Thus some of St. John's very finest work has been seen by comparatively few people. For example, the first editions of several titles such as *"Thuvia, Maid of Mars," "The Chessmen of Mars," "Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar," "Tarzan the Untamed," "Tarzan the Terrible," "Tarzan and the Golden Lion," "At The Earth's Core,"* and others contain as many as ten full-page St. John illustrations. Usually only three or four of these appeared in the reprint editions. My brother Haskell admired greatly an original from *"Tarzan the Terrible"* showing Korak, the son of Tarzan, battling the huge prehistoric reptile in the waters of the swamp which bordered the land of Pal-uldon. St. John replied, "That was one of the more difficult illustrations . . showing the figure under water with a portion of the reptile above and a part below the water line, and without the use of color, presented difficulties. I like this picture about as well as any I ever did." Many of St. John's illustrations for the Tarzan and Martian stories were painted in heavy oils on board without the use of color other than whites, blacks, and shades of gray.

In reply to the question, "What is in your opinion your best illustration for a Burroughs' tale?" St. John pointed out the one in *"Tarzan the Untamed"* where Tarzan after nearly dying of hunger and thirst on the desert—feigns death and when Ska the Vulture swoops down, he quickly comes to life and stretches forth his mighty arm to grasp the great bird. I asked Mr. St. John just how he went about illustrating a story. He replied, "Well, I first read the story for enjoyment just as you would. Then I read it a second time and jot down ideas about various scenes that appeal to me for illustrating purposes. I then try to illustrate the story accurately according to the author's description." Would that more artists today would follow this simple but wise plan!

Mr. St. John considered Edgar Rice Burroughs a good friend—but related that since Burroughs moved to

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California their paths had not crossed frequently. Burroughs always felt that St. John was a very happy choice to be the illustrator of his stories. He once told St. John that he felt that his illustrations were responsible for half the sale of his books. Mr. Burroughs once said, "I consider J. Allen St. John one of the greatest illustrators in the United States."

After we had viewed the Burroughs illustrations Mr. St. John spent nearly two hours showing us many other paintings which included many scenes painted while in Holland, Belgium, North Africa and other foreign places. He remarked that he had been "over the waters" six times. Much of his work was stored away and he had not seen some of it for twenty years. He "thought he had some more Burroughs illustrations around but wasn't sure." While rummaging through a closet he turned up quite a pile of cover paintings from western books by George W. Ogden, W. R. Raine, Charles A. Seltzer, and others. Just before we left he showed us a portfolio of his work which included sample illustrations from many books of magazines.

As Haskell and I turned to go out the door, he called us back to show us a painting he had just completed. It was a woodland scene showing a shaggy satyr kneeling before an ancient stone statue of Pan with a beautiful nude maiden astride his shoulders. The delicate coloring, the almost eerie beauty of the sylvan glade, along with the mythological subject itself, make the painting one of the finest pieces of fantasy art that I have ever seen. He had titled it, "AVA PAN," and had done it in caseine rather than oils, a medium that has intrigued him in recent years. (See FATE front cover, September, 1950.)

I shall always look back to my visit with this great fantasy artist with a great deal of genuine pleasure. Cultured and reserved, with a thoughtful and modest manner, Mr. St. John impressed me as a friendly and courteous gentleman of the old school.

J. Allen St. John is at the present time Professor of Life Drawing and Illustration at the American Academy of Art. For nearly twenty years he was an Instructor at the Chicago Art Institute. In his younger days he studied at Art Student's League in New York under William M. Chase, Carrol Beckwith, Kenyon Cox and others. In Paris he studied with Jean Paul Laurens and in Belgium and Holland with Henri Vierin. He has served as illustrator and designer for the New York Herald, Chicago Record Herald, Chicago Tribune, American Colortype Company, A. C. McClurg Publishing Company, Metropolitan Books, Inc., and the Edgar Rice Burroughs Publishing Company. He has also illustrated for such publications as HARPER'S BAZAAR, DELINEATOR, RED BOOK MAGAZINE, BLUE BOOK, GREEN BOOK, YOUTH'S COMPANION, BOY'S WORLD, WEIRD TALES, ORIENTAL STORIES,

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The painting at the left was executed by Mr. St. John as a cover illustration for FATE magazine, and is as yet unpublished. It is one of a series of paintings depicting ancient gods and goddesses and mythical characters, in this instance, the fabled beauty, Circe.

Another in the series of mythical characters is the painting of which a reproduction is shown below, is that of Galatea. Both these paintings are typical of St. John's splendid representations of fanciful characters in keeping with his original concepts.

MAGIC CARPET, FATE, AMAZING STORIES, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and others. He has illustrated many books, the most recent being "*The Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*" by John Dickson Carr.

His paintings have been exhibited in Paris Salon, National Academy in New York, Pennsylvania Academy, Chicago Art Institute, and other places. He is represented in many private and public collections. He has always maintained his private studio, and during most of his lifetime has been located on Ontario street in Chicago.

THE END

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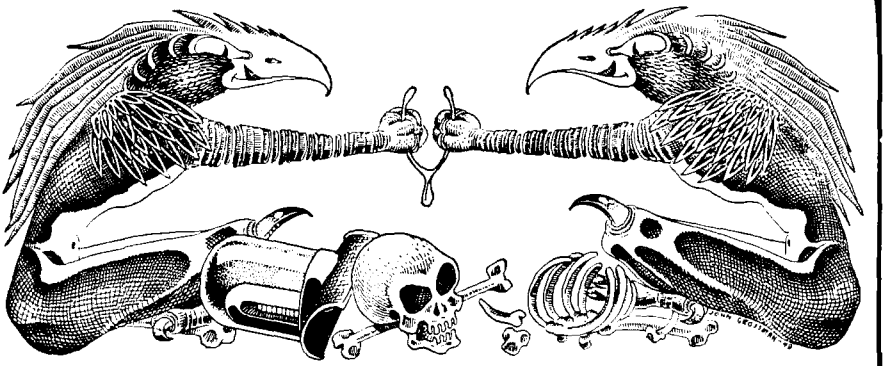

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